

## Inferno in the Sky

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## Inferno in the Sky

by [traveler\\_of\\_stars](#)

### Summary

As an exiled-padawan-turned-Underworld-engineer, George would be the first to say that living in Coruscant's oppressive underbelly is barely passable as a life. But when he's plucked from his shop by a freshly-Knighted Sapnap and inescapably tangled in a deadly plot to destroy the Jedi Order, he almost wants to go back.

For his part, Dream is just trying to make it through this situation in one piece while keeping his Padawan (a certain Force-sensitive whiz named Tubbo) alive. Then he receives

news that his former best friend is returning to the Temple, and things get even more complicated.

Put together with Wilbur and Tommy's chaotic relationship, Phil and Techno doing their best, and vicious enemies hiding around every corner, and you've got a story for the ages.

## Notes

Hello! Quick disclaimer, this story is entirely fictional. I'm taking the online personas of these people and using them to weave a. original narrative. If anyone in this story expresses discomfort with having fics written about them, I will cut them from the story - or, if their part is big enough, take this story down. The feelings of these wonderful CCs are vastly more important than this project.

Now that that's out of the way, welcome!

Author's note from the future: when I started this story, it was just a series of ideas that had been bouncing around in my head for a few days. I expected it to be short - we all see where that got me, eh?

I spent a full year watching this story take life before my eyes, and I hope you enjoy the journey as much as I did!

Welcome, dear reader, to Inferno in the Sky!

## Prologue - Echoes of History

### Chapter Notes

I wrote this prologue the same day that I did the epilogue. Please forgive the fact that my writing style changes slightly from this chapter to the next, as there's almost a year's difference between them! (Don't worry, I knew how to punctuate back then too, lol)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

It should have been a beautiful day. The sky was a beautiful blue, dappled with clouds and streaked by brilliant sunlight. A gentle breeze ruffled the grass and pushed Bad's hair around. Even the tree Bad sat underneath (a gnarled wisteria that occasionally shed lilac flowers) seemed to glow with an otherworldly radiance.

But Bad couldn't find beauty in any of it.

Everything was dull. Everything from the tree bark to the sky to the myriad of flowers planted nearby. The Gardens had once been Bad's favorite place in the Temple, but now... it only made his heart twist into knots.

"I should have seen you off," Bad mumbled aloud. "They didn't- they didn't let me."

No one responded. Bad didn't expect a response, though – the person he was talking to was long gone.

Earlier that morning, Bad had returned to the Temple with a snow globe from Dantooine in hand, cheerfully asking the nearby Councilmembers where George was. They'd looked at each other, then looked at the ground. Their silence had unnerved Bad, but it wasn't until more Councilmembers arrived up a few minutes later that Bad had started to worry.

Then they'd told him.

Bad hadn't been able to feel anything since then. He'd stumbled through the motions, debriefing the appropriate people about his diplomatic mission before stumbling out into the Gardens. He'd expected to find some meager comfort amongst the flora. Instead, his feet had taken him to the gnarled wisteria, and Bad had collapsed.

*"We regret to inform you that Padawan George Lore has been exiled. He left the Temple yesterday morning."*

A full day. Bad hadn't even left Dantooine when it'd happened.

And what had Bad heard of it? Nothing. He was one of George's closest friends, yet not a single person involved in the exile had sent him a message. Not one.

*"I'm sorry, but we cannot allow you to go after Padawan Lore. Seeing that he is exiled, you cannot contact him. No, no, we aren't debriefing anyone on the situation yet. You'll be informed of developments as soon as everyone else is."*

Garbage. All of it. Because George was gone, and Bad couldn't do a thing to get him back.

What could George have possibly done to earn his exile? He was a good person! He was a diligent padawan with a brilliant Force presence and a true talent! What was so inexcusable that he'd been exiled?!

When Bad blinked, he realized that he'd started crying again. He cracked a watery smile and did nothing to wipe the tears away. What did it matter if someone saw him? He'd spent the past two hours crying by himself, and the only reason Bad had left his previous position was exhaustion. If he passed out, at least now he was on the main path.

And, well... Bad didn't care anymore. Jedi weren't supposed to show emotion, but at the moment, he couldn't give less of a care about that rule. His friend had been exiled.

“Master Bad! Master Bad!”

The happy call was like a knife through Bad's thoughts, and he gasped, startled out of his head. He hurriedly rubbed his eyes (because that was *definitely* a kid's voice), then looked around. After a few moments, he found a mop of brown hair bobbing down the path, face split in a wide grin and icy eyes glittering with excitement.

Oh, gods. Bad couldn't do this now. He loved the boy, but-

“I've been looking all over for you!” Tubbo continued, and before Bad could say anything, the boy flopped down at Bad's side. He cradled a thick book to his chest, and despite his pain, Bad couldn't help a tiny smile. “I found this book in the Archives! It talks about the Old Order and what life was like back then! But...”

Tubbo chewed his lip absently, and after a beat, Bad recalled the boy's dyslexia. “Do you want me to tell you the story instead?” he asked. He instantly winced at how raspy his voice was, and he quickly cleared his throat. “I tell them a little different than the book does, but-”

“Yes!” Tubbo cut in. He all but tossed the book aside and leaned towards Bad, never losing that eager gleam in his eyes. “I love your stories!”

A more real smile washed away Bad's fake one. Talking did nothing to ease the all-consuming ache pressing against his chest, but Bad had always liked teaching. Maybe telling stories would help. Sometimes, he even wondered if he was better suited as a teacher than a diplomat.

Regardless...

“Alright,” Bad murmured. He pushed himself into a more upright position, then carefully a finger through the air, drawing a rune of magic. *“Αναδείξτε την πιο αγνή μαγεία μου. Επιτρέψτε μου να το διαμορφώσω.”*

His rune burst into being with a flash of light. Once Bad blinked the spots out of his eyes, he found a ball of amber sparks floating in his palm.

“Whoa.” Tubbo gaped at Bad's ball of magic, looking more than a little dazzled. “How'd you do that? Can *all* Jedi Masters do that?”

Bad smiled faintly. “No, I'm a daemon,” he corrected. “I use magic just like I do the Force.”

Tubbo's gaze shifted to Bad's, and he frowned. “You're a dae- d- demon? But you look like a human. Aren't you human?” Tubbo's frown deepened, and for a moment, it looked like the boy's face was going to cramp. “No, wait. If you're-”

"I'll explain it someday," Bad interrupted gently, and Tubbo's confusion instantly evaporated. "For right now, just trust me, alright? I'm a daemon that looks like a human."

"Okay!" Tubbo chirped. "So, what's the magic for?"

Bad wiggled his fingers, and his ball of magic deconstructed, whirling around his finger until it formed a new shape. "This is the symbol of the Old Jedi Order," Bad explained. "It looks a little different than ours, huh?"

Tubbo nodded slowly. "There's fewer wings."

"There are. A long, long time ago, the Old Order lived in this very Temple. When they were strongest, almost 10,000 Jedi lived here!" Bad paused for dramatic effect, and he was gratified by Tubbo's dumbstruck expression. "That's a lot of people, isn't it? There's only about 3,000 of us living here now."

"It's crowded just with us," Tubbo mumbled, half to himself, and Bad couldn't help but chuckle. The padawan was silent for a moment, examining the symbol in Bad's hands. Then his eyes flickered with confusion. "But where did all the people go?"

Bad hesitated. He usually skimmed over this part of the story, and he could only pray that Tubbo didn't decide to press the subject. The curious little padawan had only just become such, yet he already wanted to know everything.

Eventually, Bad decided to tell the story like he always did and deal with questions as they arose. "There were wars. Lots of them. People were getting hurt, so the Old Order sacrificed themselves to keep the universe safe."

Tubbo's face fell. For a moment, the padawan stared at the ground, and his Force presence flared with mournful understanding. Bad couldn't decide if he was impressed or horrified that Tubbo knew what damage wars wrought.

Then the brown-haired boy looked back up at him, and all traces of his quiet moment of respect were gone. "Why didn't they come back, then?" Tubbo asked. "Even if the Order sacri- sac- even if the Order went away, didn't some people make it?"

Bad pursed his lips. "Some did. But the Old Order didn't win the war, so the survivors had to go into hiding." Tubbo frowned again, and Bad quickly back-tracked. "The ones who made it had to hide. And then there was another war, and that time, the Old Order won! But the leader of that Order decided she didn't want the teachings of the Jedi to continue. So she buried our history and moved on." Bad formed his ball of magic into a set of twin lightsabers, then glanced back at his captive audience. "Are you following so far?"

Tubbo nodded a few times, his expression thoughtful. "I don't think she was much of a Jedi," he mused eventually. "My book said that she helped a Sith."

"I'd say that's a matter of opinion, Tubbo. Best not to dwell whether or not she was a Jedi."

The padawan shrugged, and Bad silently thanked the gods that he wouldn't have to fight Tubbo over what constituted being a Jedi. After all, he was a daemon Jedi, and one of his best friends had just been exiled.

A lump formed in Bad's throat. He swallowed thickly, then hurriedly reformed his ball of magic into a map of Coruscant and carried on with his story.

“A long, long time passed after her decision. People forgot about the Jedi, and Coruscant changed a lot. I bet the Coruscant in your book looks a lot different than the way it does now – the Temple, too.”

“It does!” Tubbo picked his book up from the grass and flicked through the pages. After a few moments of searching, he held the book open, displaying a picture of the Old Order's Jedi Temple. “It used to be all blocky,” Tubbo muttered, and he cast the page a disgusted look. “It's so gray and *boring*.”

“That's what Coruscant looked like back then,” Bad reminded gently. “There were a lot more skyscrapers back then. But, as people grew and changed, so did their ideas. That's why our Temple looks different and why it's not in the same place as the old Temple.”

Tubbo glanced over his shoulder, and Bad followed the boy's gaze. It was true; their Temple was a stark contrast to that of the Old Order. Theirs sprawled across the top of a mountain, with high walls surrounding the premises and the Gardens taking up at least a fourth of the whole area. The main buildings were wildly different, too – gold, silver, and marble rose in the form of beautiful buildings, and plants grew all across the Temple.

It was such a beautiful place. But it still looked so dull.

“Master Bad? Are you okay?”

Bad flinched guilty, glancing back at Tubbo. The padawan watched him with a concerned frown, and Bad cleared his throat, quickly reforming his ball of magic (which had fallen apart as his attention had drifted).

“Sorry,” Bad said hoarsely. “Where were we?”

Tubbo clearly wasn't convinced, but the boy's curiosity proved stronger than his concern. “So, that leader decided to bury our history, but we're still here. What happened?” Tubbo's grin turned a little sheepish. “I know I'm not supposed to learn this until next year's classes, but my book didn't tell me that, and... I want to know where we came from.”

Bad's mouth twitched in an involuntary smile. “That's perfectly fine. Don't let anyone stop you from being curious, okay?”

Tubbo's eyes lit up. He nodded several times, and the enthusiasm warmed Bad's chest.

“Good. Well, hundreds of years passed. I know I said that people forgot about the Jedi, but some of them remembered. And that's where our founders come in! They found some of the Old Order's texts, and those became the Jedi Code that we have today! Our founders didn't find the complete mandate, but they got the closest they could to a perfect translation. It's because of them that we rediscovered Ilum!”

“And that's where you got your lightsaber, right?” Tubbo interrupted.

Bad dropped one hand to fondly pat the silver lightsaber hanging at his belt. “Mhm. After that, there isn't much of a story to tell, I'm afraid. Our founders came back to Coruscant, built this Temple, then reestablished the Jedi Order. Now, the High Council upholds the founders' virtues.”

The story over, Bad let his ball of magic fizzle out of existence. Tubbo watched the sparks with a pensive frown. Then the padawan's face lit up with excitement, and he shot Bad a satisfied grin.

“There are six statues in the hallway outside the High Council's chambers!” Tubbo announced

proudly. “Those are the founders, aren't they?”

Again, Bad couldn't tell if he was impressed or terrified by Tubbo's quick thinking. “They are. The High Council makes decisions that keep our Order from making the same mistakes as the Old Order. They want us to stick around this time.”

Tubbo nodded, and the boy looked content in his newfound knowledge. “I trust the Council. They don't make mistakes.”

All of Bad's emotions returned in a rush. Without the story to distract him, Bad felt even colder than before. He curled in on himself, carefully hiding his face from Tubbo's view as tears welled up once again. To his relief, the padawan seemed to have become reinvested in his book. Tubbo leaned back against the tree next to Bad, and Bad rolled over, burying his face in his sleeve. He prayed Tubbo didn't notice his trembling shoulders.

The Council did make mistakes. Whatever the founders had mandated, exiling George couldn't have been the right thing to do.

Bad squeezed his eyes shut, and he just barely managed to repress a sob.

He hadn't even been able to say goodbye.

## Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading! I hope you enjoy this story!

(P.S. for anyone who came back after finishing the story: please try to avoid spoilers in the comments section! I know I am a fool for writing my prologue last, but still! Y'all are the best >:D )

# Collision Imminent, Part 1

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

*Four years later...*

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George fiddled with the bundle of wires for a few more seconds and was gratified as they finally sparked. George sighed, relieved, and carefully closed the maintenance panel of the droid he'd been fixing. Usually, repairs didn't take him quite so long. But, sometimes, there was a stubborn one among the batch.

"You're good to go, little guy," George murmured. He patted the droid's head. "See how you feel."

The droid whirred to life with a couple of happy beeps. It looked up at him, gave an appreciative whistle, and trundled away. George watched it go with a pleased smile. Droids were truly better creatures than the people that owned them.

"That was very fast. I am impressed, Master Technician."

It took all of George's willpower to keep from scowling. He glanced up from the droid and found the young woman at the door giving him a look of newfound respect. The droid had been in critical condition when she'd brought it in, and even now, she barely spared the newly revived droid a glance. She didn't care about the little machine at all. If George had space, he would have kept the droid in a heartbeat. *Master Technician*, he thought scornfully, mocking the woman's accent in his head.

But repeat customers were not made through rudeness.

"Thank you," George said aloud, giving the woman a pleasant smile. "Always eager to serve, Miss-?"

"Xania," the woman trilled. "But please, call me Pai."

*Definitely not from the surface. Between the accent and the name, and the red skin... Devaronian, maybe? A Cruise smuggler? Somewhere in the Outer Rim, maybe.*

"It was a pleasure to service your droid, Pai," George said politely. He never lost his pleasant smile, even as Pai kicked her droid and made it squeal in pain. But, behind his back, he dug his nails into his palm to keep from throwing a punch. "Is there anything else I can do for you?"

Pai looked George up and down with hungry eyes, and George groaned internally. *No, please, I just want to go to bed and-*

"There is, actually," Pai muttered. She probably thought she was quite seductive, but to George, it sounded more like she had a terrible head cold. "You are quite attractive, Master Technician. Perhaps we can find company together. Is your bed empty tonight? Even if it is not... I promise you that I am the best you can find."

*"Is your bed empty tonight?" George thought incredulously. That's the most stupid thing I've ever*



*heard.*

Even though it felt like stepping on hot coals, George kept his smile plastered on his face. “I’m an engineer, actually,” he corrected lightly. No need to answer Pai’s question – if he did, Pai wouldn’t leave until he slept with her or ran her out. Neither option was appealing.

“Engineer is even sexier,” Pai growled.

The woman began to take short strides towards him, and alarm bells wailed to life in George’s head. Shit, okay, now he was in danger of being assaulted in his own shop. It was time to end this interaction.

“Thank you so much for your business, Ms. Xania!” George said hurriedly. He rushed around Pai and made a beeline for the door. He slammed the “raise” button, then waved at the now-open door with as much grace as he could muster. “I appreciate your business, and I’m glad I could service your droid. Please, my payment?”

Pai blinked a couple of times, clearly shocked. George just stared her dead in the eyes. Silently, he begged for the woman to take the hint and leave.

After a couple of torturous seconds, it worked.

Pai huffed and stormed over to the door. She dropped a few credits into George’s hand with a disgusted sneer, then left the shop. Her droid trundled after her, and for just a moment, it glanced back at George with a sad whine. *I’m sorry*, George thought, his heart heavy. *I wish I could have kept you.*

Then the door closed. George exhaled deeply, and he rested his forehead against the cool metal. Gods, his shop was finally free of that terrible woman. He’d been lucky to make it out of that situation with his limbs (and his dignity) intact.

Eventually, George pried his eyes open and looked down at the money in his hand. He wasn’t surprised to find a couple of credits missing from the pile. George had learned long ago that ransoms were the only wages paid in full, so he charged accordingly. Making enough money to stay alive was well worth a few ugly looks from customers when they saw his prices.

*If only Pai knew that she was paying for my breakfast*, George thought, and he allowed himself a wry smile. *She would have tried to kill me.*

A small, cube-shaped droid suddenly flew out from under a nearby table, breaking George out of his petty thoughts.

“8 o’clock,” it chirped. “*Closing time.*”

George smiled down at the small droid. “Thank you, Luca,” he chuckled, and he stooped to pat the droid on the head. Luca purred for a moment, then scurried between George’s legs with a few urgent beeps. “Okay, okay, I’ll feed you soon. Let me take care of this first.” George jangled the coins in his hand. Luca visibly perked up. “Yeah. This is going to keep us fed.”

Luca spun wildly, then dashed away to its charging station. George chuckled to himself and wandered over to the counter.

George always prided himself on having one of the cleanest shops in the Underworld. Every day, after closing, he cleared his shop of trash and mopped up any disgusting substances or possible evidence that his customers trailed in. Once the basics were taken care of, George checked his safe

and tidied up his workbench. It was ironic, really. Even the scum of the Underworld were more likely to take their droids to a clean workshop.

Just as he finished dusting off the counter, Luca came hurtling over to him once again.

“Feeding time now?” the droid asked. If it had been an animal, it would have been making sad puppy-dog eyes.

George grinned at the little droid. “Yes, Luca. Feeding time.”

Luca whirred happily and raced off to the back corner of the room, where a large curtain separated George's personal workbench from the rest of his shop. George followed Luca at a much slower pace. When he reached the curtain, he gently pulled it aside. The small droids and little creations scattered across his workbench all beeped and hummed at his arrival.

“It's good to see you, too,” George said softly. He poured some oil into a large bowl that he kept on the edge of his desk, and all the droids immediately flocked to it. Once they'd had their fill, George refilled the bowl and placed it on the ground. Luca nuzzled his leg happily before beginning to lap up the oil.

George pulled the curtain back in place and glanced around one last time. Everything was taken care of. He could finally eat something and get some sleep.

With exhaustion already throbbing behind his eyes, George started towards the stairs that would take him up to his tiny apartment.

Then something gave him pause. The “something” pricked the back of his neck, a ghost of a whisper in his ear that warned him of coming danger.

George froze mid-step. The something grew more powerful, becoming a heavy presence in George's mind. Someone was heading for his shop. They were dangerously powerful, their intentions obscured by a hazy mist. But there was one thing that George was absolutely sure of: the stranger was coming for *him*.

“Luca,” George hissed, hurrying the rest of the way to the stairs. “Complete shutdown.”

He didn't wait for a reply. George reached the wall and tapped an emergency sequence into the control pad by the staircase. With the sharp crackle, the shop was plunged into darkness. A moment later, Luca beeped twice, then went silent. Everything in George's shop, including the droids, was now shut down. If the mysterious stranger had electrical scanners or EMP pulses, George's technology wouldn't be damaged or detected.

The presence still advanced. It hadn't lost its relentless pace.

George ground his teeth and crossed the room. Logically, he knew he should be fearful of a powerful enemy approaching his shop. But, as George opened the secret locker beneath the counter and pulled a metal tube from its depths, he felt nothing but annoyance. *I was so close to dinner*, George thought peevishly, hurrying back to the staircase. *I could already be eating soup, tucked under a blanket*.

Despite his frustration, George was silent as he tucked himself into the alcove that the first stair was carved into. It was a lesson that he'd learned a long time ago: the element of surprise could save his life.

The alarm bells in George's mind rose to a frenzied buzz. The danger was almost at his shop.

For just a moment, George felt a flash of worry. *Am I going to die tonight?*

The front door whooshed open. George's mind emptied as he listened to the footsteps shuffling into his shop. They were uneven and irregular, clearly unused to the treacherous grooves of gravel floors. So, the intruder wasn't an Underworld robber. They had to be from the surface.

The footsteps stopped abruptly, and George did a few quick calculations. That amount of time put with a slow cadence meant that the intruder was in the middle of the room. George inhaled quietly, clenching the metal tube in his hands.

To any outside observer, George probably looked perfectly calm. But in reality, his mouth was dry, and his heart pounded against his ribcage. External fear wasn't a luxury George had. He ignored the adrenaline coursing through his arms and focused all his attention on the intruder.

He'd been right; the person was mighty. Their aura filled the shop, emanating pure strength, and lighting every corner with its glow. But it was tainted with arrogance. The intruder wasn't even trying to shield themselves. They left themselves fully open to anyone who wanted to take a peek. There was only one enemy that didn't expect any kind of threat to be leveled against them.

George curled his lip. It was a Jedi.

The Jedi suddenly began moving again, and George adjusted his grip on the metal tube. The Jedi was coming towards him. 20 feet... 10... 5...

*Now!*

George spun from the alcove, activating the extendable staff and shoving the Jedi back a couple of steps. The Jedi yelped in surprise, which almost gave George pause. Since when did Jedi yelp?

But one startled padawan wasn't enough to override George's instinct of self-preservation.

The Jedi pulled their lightsaber from their belt, and immediately, the shop was illuminated by amber light. George glared at what little he could see of the Jedi's face. It was a he, with smooth, tanned skin, a line of stubble along his chin, and two identical scars running down his cheeks.

*This Jedi is younger than me,* George thought scornfully. *No wonder he didn't bother to shield.*

“Whoa!” The Jedi suddenly reeled back, his lightsaber dipping in evident surprise. “You're- *What the fuck?* I thought-”

George pounced on the moment of hesitation. He lashed out with the end of his staff, then immediately swung it around for another hit. The Jedi parried both blows, but he looked utterly dumbfounded. *What's with this guy?* George wondered. *Has he never been challenged in his whole life? Gods.*

“Wait!” the Jedi shouted over the crackle of their weapons. “Stop! I'm-”

The Jedi eased ever so slightly, and George attacked. He swung his staff towards the Jedi's knees, and, just as expected, the Jedi bent to protect himself. So predictable. George reversed the motion of his staff and brought it down on the Jedi's shoulder. The man howled in pain as electricity crackled across his body. Then he collapsed on the floor in a panting heap.

George scoffed lightly, picking up the Jedi's abandoned lightsaber. It was elegant, with whirls curving down the handle and an ornate pattern pressed into the metal, just above the grip. There was something strangely familiar about it.

No matter.

George pressed his boot against the Jedi's chest. He activated the lightsaber and held it to the man's throat. "Talk," he commanded. "Who sent you?"

The Jedi was still out of breath from his recent electrocution, but he was coherent enough to raise his hands defensively. George rolled his eyes. He was just starting to consider giving the Jedi a new scar when the man grabbed his hood and yanked it back.

George's heart stuttered to a stop.

He backed away from the grinning Jedi, his mind at a complete blank. Finally, he managed to stammer out a single word.

"Nick?"

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*"Georgie!"*

*"Gods, what, Nick? I'm trying to study."*

*"That's lame. Listen, Master Dante just left for the Taryggen Chain, and Master Mazenos is being a bitch about letting me practice in the arena. They don't think that I'm 'mature enough to handle being in there by myself.' Can you help me?"*

*"How am I supposed to help? They're right. You're not mature enough."*

*"Georgie! C'mon, all I need you to do is come with me to the training arena so I can prove to Mazenos that I want to be a good padawan while my Master is away!"*

*"...what are you actually planning to do?"*

*"Nothing."*

*"You can't lie to me, Nick. What is it?"*

*"Okay, okay, so maybe I wanted to spray-paint the walls. Wha- don't laugh! I'm bored, Mazenos is an asshole, and Dante took off without me! What do you expect me to do?!"*

*"Uh, I don't know, be a good padawan?"*

*"I tried that!"*

*"You tried that once, a year ago, when Dante left for a couple of hours. Even then, you ended up blowing up the infirmary! You remember that?"*

*"Gods, George. Do you even love me?"*

*"I really don't."*

*"Ouch. So you're not going to let me into the arena?"*

*"...I didn't say that. But if we get caught, I am blaming it all on you."*

---

“Could you have been any rougher?” Nick whined. He pressed the icepack against his shoulder once again and shivered. “Like, do you have any gentler weapons? I’m gonna have a bruise for months. In Tibulta’s Name, George, that really fucking hurt.”

“I already said I’m sorry,” George said, exasperated. “And don’t say it like that. It sounds weird.” Nick jutted out his bottom lip in a pout, and George scowled. “Look, when someone walks in after hours, they aren’t usually looking for a pleasant conversation. And, by the way, ‘gentler weapons’ get me killed. Or get my money stolen.”

The two of them were situated in George’s apartment. After a considerable amount of complaining on Nick’s part (“*This is my ‘hello?’ Seriously?*”), George had finally managed to drag the younger man up to the second floor. Now, Nick perched on the kitchen counter while George leaned against the wall.

The shock of seeing Nick again still wrapped around George’s neck and kept all his words balled up in his chest. It was clear that the younger man had grown into a proper Jedi. His monochromatic black and white robes fluttered around with a mind of their own, and gone was his padawan braid. He’d also thinned out, with his cheekbones more prominent than they’d been in the past.

But some things hadn’t changed at all. Nick’s hair was still long and messy, pulled back by a thin bandana, and his dark eyes glittered with life.

George didn’t know if he was ecstatic or wary.

“That was some shit you pulled down there,” Nick chuckled, rolling his shoulder experimentally. “Can I see your... thing? Was it was a staff?”

“It is a staff,” George parroted. He slid the extendable staff from his belt and held it out for examination. Nick took it with his free hand, spinning it and testing the weight. “I don’t know what it’s made of. It’s probably from an Old Empire planet, honestly. But I’ve never seen anything like it, and it serves me well. Slips through scanners, too.”

Nick nodded slightly. “I’m impressed.”

It was small talk, and George knew it. There was so much he wanted to say, so much he wanted to ask. Maybe he could get away with a simple question to break the ice.

“How’d you get those scars?” George asked. “You didn’t have those when I last saw you.” He wanted to step closer and tap Nick’s cheek, but the gesture felt too friendly.

Then, to his great relief, Nick waved him closer. George happily obliged.

“Lightsaber accident,” Nick explained, tilting his head so George could run a finger down each scar. “Well, it wasn’t an accident. This dipshit padawan wanted to make a name for himself, so he attacked me while I was on my way to a meeting. Landed on my shoulders and managed to get these cuts in before I threw him off. Kid was a fucking maniac. He got tossed out a few days later.”

“Quite the story,” George muttered. “Was it anyone I know?”

Nick grinned. “No. All the good padawans are being taught by our friends.”

*Our friends.* It didn’t sound right. George hadn’t been part of “our friends” for years. It was time to rip the bandage off.

“Nick... why’d you come and find me?”

Nick's happy smile dimmed. He set the icepack on the counter with a heavy sigh, turning to stare George dead in the eyes. "Someone's targeting the Temple," the younger man said flatly. "No one's been killed yet, but it's gotten pretty damn close. The Council wants to do what they can for the people, so they're taking all the Force-sensitives they can find into protection. If these wannabe terrorists can't get to us, the Council is worried they'll turn to the next best thing: you guys."

George cocked an eyebrow. "That's nice, but you haven't answered my question."

Nick groaned, and his serious demeanor broke like a pane of glass. "Gods, I forgot you could be this insufferable," he muttered, pressing his fingers into his eyes. "George, listen. You're in danger. I'm here to bring you to the Temple to keep you safe."

"Keep me safe?" George repeated incredulously. "And you think the best way to do that is by killing me?"

"You struck first! I was wandering around your shop looking for the control pad when you popped out of fucking nowhere and attacked me!"

Nick made a good point, actually. But George wasn't going to admit that out loud.

"I appreciate the concern, but I'm not going back to the Temple." George shoved his hands into his pockets, tearing his gaze away from Nick's piercing eyes. "I'd much rather face whoever is trying to get me out here. But, thank you, Nick. It's great to see you again."

A faint smile spread over Nick's face. "It's kinda weird to hear my name."

"What?"

"You remember that 'public names' bullshit that the Council established with some of the masters? Yeah, well, a few years back, they decided to extend the mandate to the whole Order. We all had to pick public names that we'd use instead of our real names. Sorry, not real names, 'hidden names.' That's what they're officially called."

*Another reason not to trust the Jedi*, George thought absently. "And what's your public name?" is what he said aloud.

Nick's grin came back in full force. "Sapnap."

George actually laughed. It wasn't until Nick gave him a hurt look that George realized the younger man was serious. "Wait, really?"

"Yes!" Nick protested. "I like it, okay?"

George put his hands up in mock surrender. "Alright, alright. So, am I calling you Sapnap now?"

Nick fell silent. Once again, George was struck by how different the younger man looked. Yes, George could still see his childhood friend, but the old Nick was hidden under layers of experience, growth, and life. A pang of guilt hit George's heart. He'd missed so much. Nick had graduated to Knight and gotten a new name, and George hadn't been around for any of it.

"No," Nick said eventually. "No one calls me Nick anymore. Only 'those we love'." Nick adopted a high-pitched, mocking tone for that phrase- "are supposed to know our hidden names. So, yeah. I want you to call me Nick. It'd be weird if you started calling me Sapnap, anyway."

George's heart warmed at the implications. At least some things never changed. Besides, thinking

of Nick as “Sapnap” sounded nigh unbearable.

“So, how long is it gonna take you to pack?” Nick asked suddenly, sliding off the counter and landing with a quiet “tap.”

George frowned. “Nick, I already told you, I’m not coming with you. I don’t need Jedi protection. I’m fine by myself.”

Nick raised an eyebrow. “Really?” he asked, tone dry. “You’re gonna make me spell it out? Okay. George, you’re barely surviving out here. You have a potentially illegal weapon just because you’re so worried that someone’s gonna get the jump on you. These new assassins are ruthless. They’ll drop a gas bomb through your window, and before you can chase them off with your little staff, you’re dead. No one around here is gonna try to help you. I get why you don’t wanna go back, okay? Dunno if you forgot, but I was there when you left. But you’re in a lot more fucking danger out here than you are at the Temple. I’m not-”

Nick took a sudden, sharp breath, cutting off the rest of his speech. The tension in the air was heavy, and George suddenly felt breathless.

Finally, Nick looked up again. His face was weary. “I abandoned you once, and I’ve never forgiven myself for it. So, call me selfish, but I’m not leaving without you.”

Silence filled the room. Nick’s eyes dropped to the floor, and he sank onto one of the stools, shoulders slumped. George couldn’t decide if he wanted to run, punch Nick in the nose, or simply start crying.

He’d missed so, so much. George didn’t want Jedi protection, but age-old sadness had cemented itself in his heart and made him feel like he was carrying the entire world. He would genuinely be safer where he was. In the Underworld, assassins who tried to kill other assassins were killed for their lack of morals. But Nick’s dark eyes were filled with unshed tears, and George’s throat was too tight to breathe.

Maybe it was worth taking Nick’s offer if just to see his friends again. George was too big-hearted to pretend that he didn’t think about them all the time.

Sometimes, memories of his friends were the only thing that kept him going.

“How long are the Force-sensitives staying at the Temple?” George asked quietly.

Nick waved a dismissive hand. “Just until the people attacking us are caught,” the younger man muttered, rubbing his eyes with the palms of his hands. “A couple of weeks, maybe a month at most. Most of the Force-sensitives chose to shuttle off-planet, but a few of them are staying in our visitor rooms. None of them are cramped or anything. I’m glad to hear that you care *so* much about them.”

The unspoken “*Why do you care?*” was heavy behind Nick’s words, and it made George’s heart twist even further. If it was only for a month... maybe he could get away with sneaking around the Temple and avoiding the eyes of the Council. Just for a month.

“Okay,” George mumbled. Nick didn’t react. He was staring blankly at his hands, and George realized that the younger man hadn’t even heard him. “Nick.”

“What?” Nick snapped, looking up sharply.

“I said, okay. I’ll come with you.”

Nick's eyes widened to the size of the icepack on the counter. "You- really? You're not shitting me right now, right? Because George, I swear to the gods, I will fucking put you on the ground if you're messing with me-"

"*I mean it. I... I agree to Jedi protection.*"

The words tasted like poison on George's tongue, and for a split second, he almost wanted to take them back. Then Nick was on his feet, and the younger man had crushed George in a tight hug. George's heart swelled. With an airy feeling in his stomach, George slowly returned the hug. The fabric of Nick's robes was rough between his fingers, and the younger man's heaving breaths were hot against his shoulder.

Tears gathered in George's eyes. He hadn't had a hug in so long.

"I'm really, *really* happy to hear that," Nick laughed. His voice was watery, and he clung to George a little tighter. "I was starting to get really fucking scared that you were gonna make me leave without you."

George closed his eyes for a moment, chasing away the tears that threatened to fall. "I still think I'm safer down here," he said, trying for a light tone. "But... don't worry. I'm coming with you."

Nick pulled back, and his smile grew to bursting. "Good. Get your fucking stuff. I want to get back to the Temple by dawn."

George rolled his eyes, but he didn't complain about being bossed around. He just threw the icepack at Nick's head, ignored the younger man's wail of protest, and headed into his bedroom. Already, George's mind was racing ahead, making a list. All he had to pack some clothes and shut down his droids, and he'd been ready.

Halfway through packing his bag, something gave George pause. He glanced around his bedroom. Despite having been in his apartment for years, it still didn't look like George lived there. Maybe... he'd never really moved on from the Temple. Maybe this break from the Underworld would do him good. After all, there was only so much hope one could find in the depressive underbelly of Coruscant.

*It's gonna be rough*, George thought grimly, and he shoved another shirt into his bag. Then, slowly, a smile spread over his face. *But I'm going to see my friends again.*

Old memories kept George smiling all the way through the rest of his packing.

---

Phil stared down at the courtyard. It was filled with people, all talking and laughing. Some of them, Phil knew. There were a couple groups of rowdy padawans, making mischief before their lessons. Others in the courtyard were regular Jedi, appreciating a quiet moment in the hustle and bustle of their lives.

And all of them were in danger.

Melancholy had weighed heavy on Phil's shoulders for the past couple of weeks. Although he was by no means an elder Jedi, Phil accepted responsibility for many of his peers. The attacks on the Temple made him feel so, *so* powerless. He was on the Jedi High Council, for gods' sakes! How was Phil supposed to be a "keeper of the peace" when he couldn't even do anything about a couple of rebels with outdated laser guns?



The “outdated laser guns” part was a little cavalier. The last attack on the Temple had blown a chunk out of the East Wing. Phil absently ran a hand over the new scar on his right forearm, which he'd received while slicing a piece of falling rubble apart.

“There you are. I was starting to worry.”

Phil snapped out of his thoughts and looked around, startled. After a moment, he picked out Technoblade striding towards him. A few strands of the pig Jedi's pink hair fluttered around him in the morning breeze.

“Hey, Techno,” Phil said. He tried for a smile but couldn't quite manage it. “I'm fine. Just... thinking.”

“I know. I heard you from across the Temple.”

Phil chuckled faintly. Techno leaned against the railing next to him, and the presence of the pig Jedi set Phil at ease. Their bond glowed softly in the back of his mind, warm and gentle against his frayed nerves.

“So,” Techno said, after a moment of silence. “What's the Council saying?”

Phil sighed, and he ran frustrated hands through his hair. “Nothing,” he muttered. “They're still bashing their heads together trying to figure out what's going on. They're just bullshitting their way through this, honestly. The task force is coming together, but I wish I could get approval for you and me to go investigate ourselves. It'd definitely be faster.”

Techno snorted.

For a moment, the two of them just stood together, gazing down at the courtyard. Then Techno spoke again, so quietly that Phil had to strain to hear him.

“Have you heard?”

“Heard what?” Phil asked dryly. “There's more gossip in this Temple than the Kardischkhan Bar.” Techno chuckled humorlessly, and Phil cracked a small smile. “No, I haven't. What's going on?”

“Sapnap found a genius, Force-sensitive engineer in the Underworld last night. He said it's the last sensitive he could find down there. They'll be here in a few hours.”

A coil of worry and curiosity wound its way around Phil's stomach. “Who's the engineer?”

Techno met his gaze with weary eyes. “George.”

Phil had expected as much, but it was no easier to hear. He heaved a heavy sigh before asking, “Has anyone told Dream? Someone has to tell him before they get here.”

“I think Bad is breaking it to him now,” Techno said, and the barest hint of a smile crossed his face.

Phil winced. “Wouldn't want to be there for that.”

They lapsed into silence once again. Below, people kept laughing, and life moved on. Phil felt like he was frozen in time, watching two ships on a collision course and being powerless to stop them. When would the next attack come? Would it be the one that finally killed a Jedi? And when someone did die, who would it be? A padawan? One of Phil's friends? Techno? Phil himself?

A padawan in the courtyard screeched, breaking Phil out of his head. He pushed himself off of the railing. "I have to get going," he said quietly. Worry immediately flooded their bond, even though Techno's eyes didn't shift from the courtyard.

"The Council wants you back already?" the pig Jedi muttered.

"Yeah. You should come with me. Get your mind off..." Distant explosions still rung in Phil's ears, and he took a shuddering breath. "You know you don't have to. But I wouldn't mind an extra set of ears. You might even be able to convince the Council that some of their decisions are damn foolish."

"Phil, they won't listen to me. They won't even let me in the Chambers."

"We can try."

Techno glanced up at him. Phil met the pig Jedi's gaze evenly, but through their bond, he told Techno just how desperate he was. Phil had been fighting a losing battle all day, and gods, if he didn't need some support.

After a long moment, the corners of Techno's mouth twitched. "Sure, why not?" he drawled. "Maybe they'll listen if both of us shout at them."

---

"Hell, no!" Clay shouted.

From somewhere near the door, Bad heaved a frustrated sigh. For a moment, Clay felt guilty. It wasn't Bad's fault that Clay's past was coming back to bite him. The poor man was just the one the Council had chosen to deliver the news (they'd picked correctly, Clay had to admit. He would have ripped anyone else to shreds.)

But Clay's past was coming back to bite him, and he was still furious.

"Dream, you can't leave," Bad said tiredly. "We need you here in case something happens."

"The 'something' is already happening!" Clay spluttered, whirling to face the daemon Jedi standing in his living room. Bad crossed his arms wordlessly, and somehow, that just fueled the fire in Clay's gut. "Bad, how many years has it been?"

Bad gave him a sharp look. "I don't think you need me to tell you that."

Clay didn't. It had been four years, two months, and three days. And *no*, Clay didn't obsessively keep a running timer in his head. The day George had left the Temple had been one of the most eventful in recent history. Clay could walk up to almost anyone on Coruscant and ask, "When was Padawan George exiled?" and most would respond with the date that was four years, two months, and three days ago.

...but no one knew it down to the exact day.

Clay looked away from Bad's gaze. He knew what he would find in the daemon's eyes: empathy and sadness. Clay didn't want either. The air in his quarters suddenly became stifling, and he turned, striding to the window. Technically, Clay wasn't supposed to leave the windows open (due to the recent attacks), but he didn't really care. Fresh air cleared his mind.

It was a beautiful day. Clay could hear people talking from miles away, smell food from the

southern districts, feel the chilly touch of the breeze. If he had his way, Clay would be in his speeder, sailing over the city. But, again, due to the recent attacks, he was grounded.

*Did the Council plan it this way?* Clay wondered dazedly. *Did they wait until George was almost here to pass the order?*

George was actually coming back. Clay couldn't believe it.

Bad suddenly appeared at Clay's side, and he placed a gentle hand on Clay's shoulder. "It's okay that you're scared, Dream," the daemon said softly. "Just don't cover up your fear with anger. It's not the Jedi way. And... it's not a good look on you."

"I'm not covering anything up," Clay muttered defensively.

But, if Clay was honest, Bad was right, as usual. He wasn't mad. He just felt hollow. When George had first left, Clay had been angry all the time. But as the years went by, the anger had slipped away. And once he'd been given a padawan, Clay had been forced to ground himself and confront his feelings.

Clay had never really gotten that part. Confronting his feelings.

"Do you want to see him again?" Bad asked quietly.

"No." A blatant lie. "Do you?"

Bad's face softened into a gentle smile. "Of course I do. I missed him. I bet he still gives amazing hugs. I'm totally going to greet him with a hug, and I don't care if he doesn't want one. The best way to figure out if someone has changed is to give them a hug. I hope he hasn't changed too much. I really missed his hugs."

Something about Bad's rambling eased the frantic pounding of Clay's heart. Bad was a good man, better than any other Clay knew. For the better part of his life, Clay had based his moral compass on the daemon's own compassion. If Bad was ready to let the past be the past and see who George had grown into... maybe Clay could, too.

Maybe. If all Clay's anger and hurt and confusion came flooding back once he saw George's face again, well... Clay couldn't be held accountable for what happened next. At that point, it was basically Bad's job to keep him in check.

"I'm not going to keep you in check," Bad said disapprovingly. "You're a master now, Dream. You have to be accountable for your own emotions."

"Stop reading my mind," Clay grumbled, with no real venom.

"I'm not reading your mind. You're projecting so loudly, anyone nearby can probably hear you."

Clay swore under his breath and strengthened his mental shields. That was one thing he'd always despised about growing up. When he'd been younger, no one had cared what Clay thought or how loudly he thought it. But as a master, he was expected to be a model Jedi. Bullshit, in Clay's opinion. He was barely 21; how the fuck was he supposed to be perfect?

"Language."

"In Tibulta's Name, Bad..."

“You're still projecting really loudly!”

Clay sighed, but he did so with a faint smile. Talking with Bad always cheered him up. It was like taking a mental refresher from the rest of the world.

“Do you think you'll be able to talk to him?”

The question came so far out of left-field, Clay almost responded honestly. *No. Never.* But he choked down his knee-jerk reaction and considered for a couple of seconds. “I don't know,” he muttered eventually. “But I don't think the Council will care if I don't. They'll be happy if I just hang back and look imposing.”

“Think of your padawan, Dream,” Bad scolded lightly. “He's gonna be really disappointed if he can't talk to George. You know that.”

Clay chuckled, and right on cue, he felt his padawan's Force signature come flying down the hallway. A moment later, Tubbo burst into the room, his face alight with excitement and his mouth already moving faster than Clay could keep up with.

*“Sapnap just got here, and he brought the new Force-sensitive man! He seems nice, but he's kinda short. Almost as short as me, actually. Anyways, Tommy and Master Wilbur are already there, and I think Master Philza-”*

“Tubbo, slow down,” Clay said, grinning faintly. “Try again. Less words.”

Tubbo frowned, but he took a deep breath and fell silent for a couple of seconds. “Knight Sapnap arrived a few minutes ago,” he said slowly. “The new Force-sensitive man is with him. Tommy and Master Wilbur are already greeting him, and Master Philza is on his way there.” Tubbo took another breath, probably to repeat some of the details he'd mentioned the first time, but snapped his mouth shut.

Clay would have praised Tubbo had not his head been spinning. It was really happening. George was back at the Temple, and there was nothing Clay could do anymore. He couldn't leave; he couldn't hide. As a Jedi Master, he was obligated to greet George, just like every other Master with every new Force-sensitive arrival. And that's what he was going to do. No matter how sick he felt.

Bad gently patted Dream's shoulder. “You can do this,” the daemon said softly. “I'm right here with you.”

Clay took a shuddering breath. Now or never.

He squared his shoulders and focused on Tubbo, who was looking between Clay and Bad with a confused look. Clay smiled wanly. He'd never told Tubbo about his involvement in George's exile.

And, if he had anything to say about it, Tubbo would never know the full story.

“Come on, Tubbo,” Clay said, striding out of his quarters. Tubbo and Bad both followed him, Tubbo scrambling a little to keep up. Clay smiled as his padawan fell into place beside him. “You like the new guy, huh?”

Tubbo's eyes glowed. “Yeah! He was really strong. He almost felt like you, Master.”

Clay flinched. Luckily, Tubbo didn't notice and just kept talking.

“He seemed a little on edge, though. He kept looking at Knight Sapnap like he was worried. I

would be nervous if I was him, too. But Master Wilbur is there, and Master Philza is on his way, so he should calm down soon!"

"You're going to have to talk less once we get out there, Tubbo," Clay chided gently. "You only get to come along because you're my padawan. We don't want to scare this guy away. He's one of the last Force-sensitives we're taking in, remember?"

Tubbo's face fell slightly. "Oh. Right. Sorry, Master."

Clay ruffled his padawan's hair, earning a squawk of protest from the brown-haired boy. "Don't apologize. You can still talk, just talk less. Ask easy questions and be prepared to listen."

Tubbo nodded, and his smile returned in full force.

"You're doing a good job," Bad noted as Tubbo hurried ahead of them. The daemon shot Clay a warm smile. "You should be proud of yourself. He's going to be an amazing Jedi."

*I know. I hope I don't screw him up.* "Yeah, he will be," Clay said aloud. He grinned at the back of his padawan's head. "Only once Tommy grows up, too. Swear to the gods, Tubbo isn't gonna improve until Tommy stops getting them into trouble. I've got to talk to Wilbur about his kid again."

Clay and Bad fell silent, content to listen to the sounds of the Temple. But the silence didn't last long. All too soon, they reached the runway and found a crowd amassed at the base of the tall steps. Tubbo gasped with barely contained glee and threw himself down the steps. Bad quickly followed him, sweeping towards the other Jedi Masters. But Clay hung back.

The Jedi below him focused around a central point. Logically, Clay knew that the central point was George. But it all felt so surreal. Maybe the crowd would part, and no one would be there. Maybe Clay could get a little time before he had to face this.

"Dream."

Techno suddenly detached himself from the shadows and stepped to Clay's side.

"Techno," Clay returned evenly.

"Are you gonna go down there? I see Tommy and Tubbo together. You should probably keep an eye on your padawan."

"I know what I'm doing, asshole."

"I'm sure you do."

Despite their exchange, their body language didn't express any hostility. At this point, Clay didn't know how to talk to Techno without making a few subtle digs. The same went for the pig Jedi, though Techno was by far the more laid-back of the two of them.

"Are you going to talk to him?"

Clay glanced at the other Jedi Master. Techno's eyes were fixed on the crowd below, tension evident in the lines of his face.

"I don't know," Clay admitted. "Are you?"

Techno just sighed. Four years had brought a significant change in Techno's appearance and

personality. The pig Jedi's plain padawan robes had long since been exchanged for deep red robes, and his formerly close-cropped pink hair was now pulled back in a long ponytail. The only things that hadn't changed were the small tusks protruding from his lips and his piercing red eyes.

As for his personality change... well... that was apparent in the fact that Clay called Techno the more laid-back of the two of them.

“Not until Phil gets here,” Techno muttered eventually. “But I'm still gonna go down there.”

With that, the pig Jedi swept into the crowd and disappeared.

Clay exhaled heavily. He was alone now. He alone had to make the decision to step out of the shadows.

Time to face the dreams that haunted him at night and the memories that floated around his head every waking hour.

Time to face his past.

Clay started down the steps with his chin up and his shoulders back. His confidence carried him all the way to the bottom of the steps, but then, the crowd parted. Clay found himself facing an athletic man with short, brown hair, flushed cheeks, and haunted, heartbroken eyes. Clay's confidence abandoned him in a rush, and as the man turned to meet his gaze, his heart stuttered.

*George.*

## Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading! If you liked this, please drop a comment to let me know! :D

Criticism/comments/compliments are all greatly appreciated!

## Collision Imminent, Part 2

### Chapter Notes

Welcome back to the wonderful world of Star Wars! A couple of updates before this chapter begins...

I have a bad habit of writing way too much (which you will see as this story progresses lol). The full chapter ended up being around 9k words total, so I've decided to break each chapter into several parts! That way, you guys get updates more quickly, and I have a shorter document to work with!

(Note: if you couldn't tell from the first chapter, this story will be told in rotating POV. There is no pattern to who is narrating; I just use who can best depict what's going on.)

Enough of me rambling! Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Wilbur tried to concentrate. For the past hour, his emotions had been all over the place. Now that he finally had a spare moment to breathe, he wanted to center himself and get his raging mind under control. Then Tommy fiddled with his lightsaber for the fifth time in as many minutes, and Wilbur's patience finally snapped.

"Tommy, shut the fuck up," he muttered.

"I didn't say anything," Tommy protested instantly. "I was just making sure that my lightsaber was still there! Be pretty embarrassing, some Force-sensitive idiot shows up, and the first thing he sees is a Jedi drop his lightsaber."

"You're not a Jedi, you're a padawan. And you think as loudly as you talk. Quiet your mind."

With much grumbling and dirty looks, Tommy folded his hand within the sleeves of his robes. A moment later, the wave of emotions that had been berating Wilbur's mind finally washed up. With Tommy calmed down, Wilbur managed to get his own anxiety under control. He heaved a deep sigh.

How long had it been since he'd last spoken to George? After the other man had gotten exiled, Wilbur had kept in contact with him for a couple of months. And then... George had disappeared. Dropped off the radar like he'd never even existed. For a while, Wilbur had wondered if his friend had died.

"Why is this guy important, again?" Tommy whispered loudly. He ignored the glares he got from the Jedi standing around him. "He's just a man, isn't he?"

Wilbur ground his teeth. Maybe an explanation would finally make Tommy shut up. "Do you remember hearing about a padawan getting kicked out of the Order when you were a youngling?"

"Yeah. My teacher threatened to do the same to me."

"This guy is the padawan that got kicked out."

“Oh.” A brief pause. And then: *“Holy shit-”*

“Watch your mouth, Tommy!” Wilbur snapped. This time, he too got glares from his fellow Jedi, but he kept his attention on his padawan. Belatedly, Wilbur wondered if he'd given Tommy a few bad habits when it came to manners. “This is not the time or place!”

Tommy glowered at him. “You told me to 'shut the fuck up' a few seconds ago, why can't I-”

Wilbur grabbed Tommy by the sleeve and dragged him away from the group. The other Jedi didn't need to hear that Wilbur was about to tell Tommy much more than any padawan was supposed to know.

“Tommy, this guy is really fucking important,” Wilbur said, once they were a safe distance away from the rest of the Jedi. “When he was training here, he was one of the most powerful people I knew, okay? Even stronger than some of the Jedi teaching him. He was lined up to be the youngest Jedi Knight in a century.”

Tommy's eyes went wide, and for once, he seemed willing to listen. “What happened?” he asked, almost reverently.

Wilbur hesitated.

*“I didn't mean to! I'm-”*

*“-a disgrace to the name of Jedi! You didn't do-”*

*“-the best that I could! What would you have done in my place? Could you have-”*

*“-made the worst mistakes ever seen by this council! We want you to-”*

*“-get out! I don't want to ever see you again! You'd better-”*

*“-leave your lightsaber. You have been removed from-”*

*“-history! I tried! I fucking tried, Clay!”*

“That's not important,” Wilbur said quietly. “What's important is that George is going to be a huge target. I think the only reason that he survived this long is that no one knows he's still alive.”

Tommy thought for a moment. Then he tipped his head in a way that Wilbur found eerily reminiscent of himself. In Tibulta's Name, did they really spend that much time around each other? Wilbur would have to take a vacation before some of Tommy's habits rubbed off on him.

“You said he's powerful,” the blond boy said slowly. “Is he as strong as Dream? Or Master Techno?”

Wilbur cracked a wan smile. “If he'd stayed at the Temple, he'd probably be stronger.”

“Damn. I wish I'd met him back then.” Tommy's face suddenly went pale, and he clutched at Wilbur's sleeve. “Oh, gods, Wilbur-”

“Tommy?” Wilbur said, and panic shot through his gut as he steadied his padawan. “What's wrong?”

Then Wilbur felt it too. An overwhelming wave of arrogance and disgust from the Jedi standing nearby. Their heads were together, and they spoke in hushed tones. Wilbur glared at the cluster of



tan robes, even though none of them faced him. How immature did they have to be not to shield their emotions? Even the padawans in the group looked uncomfortable with their masters' behavior.

"Fuckin' pricks, all of 'em," Tommy hissed. He was still paler than usual, and his hands trembled on Wilbur's arm.

"Tommy, shush," Wilbur muttered. "They can still hear you."

Wilbur didn't really mean it. If there was one thing that he and his padawan agreed on, it was that most of the Jedi were shit. There was a select handful that they both liked, but anyone outside that handful was subject to Wilbur's scorn (and, by extension, Tommy's mockery). Aside from that, Tommy was one of the most perceptive padawans Wilbur had ever seen. The boy could pick out a single feud amongst a million couples. Whenever someone as strong as a Jedi willfully projected their emotions, Tommy felt it. And the more negative the emotion, the more adverse its effect on him.

That disregard for Tommy's sensitivity alone was enough to make Wilbur despise some of the Jedi in the Order. No one hurt his padawan on his watch.

"Wait, Will, someone's coming," Tommy muttered. He straightened and stared at the end of the runway. "Holy Kantos, that's... that's powerful."

Usually, Wilbur would rebuke Tommy for using his first name. But this was a unique situation.

"Who is it?" Wilbur asked, resting a hand on his lightsaber.

Tommy squinted at something Wilbur couldn't see. Then his eyes widened to comical size. "I think your exiled friend just got here," he said, voice uncharacteristically quiet.

A sleek, fire-red craft suddenly lifted over the edge of the runway. It settled into a perfect landing, and for a beat, nothing happened. Wilbur could almost hear everyone holding their breath. Then the cockpit swung open, and two men dropped from the ship. One was Sapnap, his robes flowing around him as he walked. The other was about the same height as Sapnap, maybe just a little shorter. His dark hair was neat and trimmed, and his equally dark eyes scanned the Jedi nervously. He wore a plain jacket, loose pants, and sturdy boots – but none of it was enough to hide the powerful aura radiating off of him.

*How the hell did you survive so long?* Wilbur wondered. *Gods, it's good to see you.* He longed to run and give his old friend a hug, but not yet. This moment was crucial.

Sapnap and George stopped in front of the crowd of Jedi, George awkwardly out of place among all the flowing robes and long hair.

"It's good to see you again, Padawan," an older Jedi rumbled. "I thought that with your last departure, you'd be gone for good."

Wilbur bristled, and once again, he had to keep himself from marching over to George and slinging an arm around his shoulders. Wilbur was opinionated and passionate, but he wasn't stupid. Reconnecting with George so quickly after his controversial arrival would make Wilbur (and Tommy) hated.

"They already hate us," Tommy grumbled. "I say we put another nail in our coffin."

Wilbur flinched. Had his shields slipped? Being Tommy's master meant that he always had to keep

his thoughts protected, lest his padawan would go poking around his head. It got very exhausting in times of stress.

“Yes, they did. And your shields aren't very good, by the way. I can still hear you most of the time.”

“Tommy, shut up.”

George was talking to all the Jedi now, and his face had gone a few shades paler. Sapnap, on the other hand, was flushed, and he looked ready to commit homicide. Time to intervene.

*Sapnap, get your ass over here*, Wilbur projected, as loudly as he could while still focusing the thought.

“Holy Kantos, Wilbur. And you say that I'm loud.”

“Tommy, I'm serious, shut up. And don't call me Wilbur.”

Luckily, Sapnap had also heard Wilbur's mental call. He looked around for a moment, clearly confused, then caught Wilbur's gaze. Sapnap muttered something to George and headed towards them. Panic flashed across George's face, and Wilbur felt a pang of guilt for taking the shorter man's only lifeline. But better leaving George on his own than Sapnap killing someone.

“He's certainly getting a warm reception,” Wilbur noted, once Sapnap was within earshot.

Sapnap scoffed. “Yeah. They would tear him apart if I wasn't here. I can tell they're judging me for even bringing him back.”

“What'd they expect you to do?”

Sapnap's smile was cold. “Honestly? I think they wanted me to kill him.”

Wilbur exhaled softly. “Let me guess,” he said, and sadness settled over his chest. “They told you to do whatever you had to? Use any force necessary to get the Force-sensitive individual to comply?” Sapnap didn't respond, and Wilbur knew that he was right. In Tibulta's Name. At times, the Council could be nothing short of inhumane.

“Do you even have the stomach to kill someone, Sapnap?”

Tommy's comment came as such a shock, Wilbur actually chuckled. Then at the look of pride on the blond boy's face, Wilbur mentally slapped himself. *Idiot. Stop giving him the attention he wants.*

“Hello to you too, Tommy,” Sapnap grumbled. “What, no 'master' for me?”

Tommy scowled. “You're not that much older than me. And you're not a master.”

Sapnap smiled again, and this time, it was near carnivorous. “But I'm not a little padawan like you, am I?”

Wilbur cleared his throat, effectively ending the postering. “Shut up, both of you,” he muttered. “Sapnap, you should probably go back over there. George doesn't look like he's doing so good.”

“Not doing so well” was the understatement of the century. Wilbur was terrible at reading other people, and even he could feel the raw tension that flew off George like sparks from a fire.

“Yeah, I've got him,” Ssnap sighed. “Is Philza coming? He could really help us out right now.”

“I think so. Give him a couple more minutes.”

Ssnap nodded tersely, then strode back over to George. He pushed his way through the ring of Jedi that had surrounded George without apologizing once. For a brief moment, Wilbur could see George clearly. A look of sheer relief flashed over the shorter man's face as Ssnap rejoined him. Then the circle closed, and it looked like the two of them had been swallowed by robes.

“I can feel George really clearly,” Tommy said, quietly. “Almost as clearly as you, Will, and I don't even know him. He's strong. Everyone is gonna want him dead.”

For once, Wilbur agreed with his padawan.

---

Tubbo hurried down the stairs, taking them two at a time. Dream and Bad were somewhere behind him, so he didn't mind throwing himself into the crowd. He hit the bottom of the stairs and only paused to look for Tommy. Once Tubbo found his friend's mess of blond hair standing next to a nearby pillar, he picked his pace back up to a sprint.

“I'm back,” Tubbo whispered. “What did I miss?” Dream had told him to talk less, but given the situation, talking quieter seemed equally appropriate.

Tommy scowled, and Tubbo felt the ripples of his annoyance.

“A lot, actually,” the taller boy muttered. “Wilbur abandoned me, told me to stay over here while he went into the dog pit. He's just there for moral support or some shit, I don't know. Anyway. D'you know who this guy is? Did Dream tell you anything else?”

Technically, Tubbo wasn't supposed to know anything. Dream had cut him off from every piece of information beyond the past four years, and none of the Jedi (even Philza) would tell him anything. But one night, Tubbo had accidentally felt one of his master's night terrors. Once he'd put that information with what Tommy had told him about this new arrival, the pieces had started to fall together.

“His name is George,” Tubbo said slowly. “I dunno his last name. He's been gone four years, two months, and three days ago. He's really, *really* strong, and he was exiled for using his power for something bad. He... I think he killed someone. But I don't know that for sure. He might have a special connection to Master Dream, too.”

Tommy gave Tubbo an odd look. “What do you mean, 'special connection?'” he asked. “And why the hell do you know exactly how long he's been exiled?”

Whoops. Maybe Tubbo did have to be a little more careful about running his mouth.

“What do you know?” Tubbo asked, hoping to get Tommy's mind off his strangely specific knowledge. If Dream ever found out that Tubbo knew as much as he did... well, Tubbo didn't know what would happen. But he was sure it was bad.

Tommy rolled his eyes. “Less than you. All I know is that everyone wants him dead.”

But, to Tubbo's relief, the taller boy didn't ask any more questions. Tubbo hopped onto the pillar that Tommy leaned against and craned his neck over the crowd. Dream's night terror had also given him a blurry mental picture of George, and the first time Tubbo had been to the runway, he'd

caught a faraway glimpse. Maybe this time, he could actually get a good look at the new man.

Suddenly, Tubbo saw him. A shorter man with dark hair, dark eyes, and pale skin. He stood in the midst all of the Jedi, Sapnap by his side. He was visibly nervous, but he seemed to be holding his ground.

*He's beautiful.*

Tubbo frowned, startled by the intrusive thought. Where the hell had that come from? He certainly hadn't thought it. Who was inside his head?

Then Tubbo's mind was assaulted by a million unfamiliar emotions, and Tubbo hurriedly threw up his mental shields. After a moment, he realized that it hadn't been his keen eyes that had drawn his gaze to George. Tubbo glanced at the bottom of the stairs. Sure enough, Dream was frozen still, eyes fixed on the new arrival.

“What the fuck is Dream doing?” Tommy muttered. “He's just... staring.”

Tubbo glanced at his taller friend. Tommy was clearly concentrating, trying to get into Dream's head. *If Tommy can't sense what I am, Tubbo thought, then that means Master Dream has kept all this bottled up for a long time. Maybe he's even been hiding these feelings.*

Regardless of Dream's motivations, Tubbo knew one thing for sure: he was about to see his master in a state that he'd never witnessed before.

Dream suddenly stirred from his stupor, and he strode towards George with his shoulders squared. It occurred to Tubbo that it might be smart to get away from Dream and the crowd, just in case something went wrong. Plus, he wanted a better view.

“Tommy, get up here,” Tubbo hissed. Tommy glanced up at him, and Tubbo held out a hand. “I want to go up.”

“Why?” Tommy hissed back. “We can see fine from right now.”

Tubbo rolled his eyes, and after a grumble of irritation, Tommy accepted his hand. Once his friend was settled onto the pillar as well, Tubbo dug his heels into the stone and launched himself up. The Force carried him the couple of extra inches that landed him safely on the next ridge of the pillar. The archway above the stairs was cramped, but it wasn't the most challenging space Tubbo had ever gotten himself to. It just took a few careful jumps to propel himself onto the loft beams.

“Hurry up, Tommy!” Tubbo called. Quietly, though. He didn't want any of the Jedi to know that he and Tommy were creeping in the rafters.

Tommy slipped on one of his jumps, and he let out a string of curses. “I'm hurrying,” the blond boy snapped. “Just go up to the perch without me.”

“Dream! Wait a minute!”

Tubbo looked around sharply. Was that Philza's voice? He had to hurry before he missed everything. With two more calculated jumps, Tubbo landed on a broad, concrete beam that supported the arch's center. It was just thick enough for Tubbo to crouch on and provided meager cover, so no one could see him.

Once he'd balanced himself, Tubbo gazed down into the crowd. The Jedi had parted like water, leaving George and Sapnap standing on one side and Dream and Philza on the other. Even from all

the way in the rafters, Tubbo could feel the animosity between Dream and George. His master's emotions also prickled at the back of his skull, just barely concealed by Dream's mental shields.

Tommy finally crawled to Tubbo's side, and he was visibly winded. "Alright," the taller boy muttered. "What's going on?"

"Nothing yet."

The two fell silent, and they watched as the standoff below them continued. Then Dream said something that Tubbo couldn't quite make out. Tubbo started to lean forward, but as soon as he did, Dream's voice raised to a shout.

"Clear out!" Tubbo flinched at his master's voice. It was cold and cruel – almost lifeless. Was that really his master? "This welcome is over."

With that, Dream turned and swept towards the stairs.

"Unbelievable," Tommy grumbled. "We missed it all. Great idea, Tubbo."

Tubbo barely heard the jab. He focused on his master, watching every muscle in Dream's face as he walked away. Tubbo knew how to read Dream's face, even with the mask on. Plus... Dream's shields were always weak when he was upset.

Anguish. Shame. *Gods, I'm so sorry, George.* A deep sorrow that Tubbo felt in his very bones. *Will you ever forgive me? I don't blame you if you don't.* Guilt. Anger. Regret. Regret so strong that Tubbo almost wondered if he'd made a terrible mistake that he'd forgotten about. *I just want to hug you. I just want to tell you that I missed you so fucking much.*

*You're still beautiful.*

Then Dream disappeared into the Temple. Tubbo lost his direct connection to his master, and Dream's emotions settled into background noise once again. Tubbo had to blink a couple times to bring himself back into the present.

"Tubbo? Are you crying?"

"What?" Tubbo croaked. He swiped at his eyes and realized that he was actually crying. Had Dream's emotions been that potent?

"Tubbo, what's wrong?" Tommy asked, concern lacing his voice.

Tommy started to reach out, but Tubbo gently knocked his hand away. "It isn't me," he murmured. "That was Dream."

For a moment, Tommy just stared at him. Then the penny dropped, and Tommy's eyes widened to the size of saucers. "Dream felt all that?" he hissed. Tubbo nodded numbly, still shocked by everything that he'd felt. "Holy Kantos. I think you were right, Tubbo. This guy and Dream definitely have history."

Tubbo agreed. There was a whole story at his fingertips, and now, he was just itching to uncover it all. What had happened four years ago?

"Tommy, you need to go," Tubbo ordered.

Tommy frowned at him. "What the hell are you talking about?"

“Go! Get down there and talk to Wilbur, tell him that I left or something. I need to stay here. Dream didn't explicitly tell me to leave, because I was never part of the welcome. I'm going to stay up here and wait. I want to talk to George.”

Tommy didn't lose his frown, but he nodded reluctantly. “Fine. You'd better tell me everything later.”

“Yeah, yeah, I will.”

Tubbo settled in while Tommy started his descent back to solid land. Tubbo watched as the crowd of Jedi rippled and shifted, still reacting to Dream's command to leave. He shuddered. Dream's voice had been that of a different person when he'd shouted. Tubbo didn't know who that voice belonged to, but he desperately hoped that he'd never meet that side of his master.

Slowly, painfully slowly, Jedi filed off the runway. Eventually, George came into Tubbo's line of sight.

*What story do you have to tell, former Master Jedi?*

## Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading! Leave some kudos if you enjoyed, and feel free to drop a comment! Comments make me <3

## Collision Imminent, Part 3

### Chapter Notes

A bit of a long chapter this time! (6k words, and here I was trying to split the chapters to make them shorter hhh) But... when Dream and George meet for the first time in years, you need a long chapter.

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

George remembered everything about the Temple as soon as Nick's ship touched down on the runway. He saw a group of stoic Jedi waiting for him, arms crossed and faces stern. He saw the Temple itself, in all its imposing glory, glittering in the early morning sunlight. He saw where his room used to be, and the training arena where he'd spent hours locked in combat.

He hated every part of it.

"I think I want to go back now," George mumbled.

"Sorry, you already agreed to this," Nick said cheerfully. In George's opinion, the younger man was far too eager to face the storm that awaited them.

"That was yesterday," George protested. "I've had a whole night to think it over, and I changed my mind. The Underworld isn't really that bad." He refused to give up and let himself be led into the lion's den without a fight – even though he had offered to go into the lion's den in the first place.

Nick unstrapped himself from his harness and turned to look George dead in the eyes. George instinctively tensed, and it took a couple of seconds before his hands unclenched. Usually, when someone looked at him like that, they were about to charge. It was proving more difficult to adjust back to civilized life than George had thought it'd be.

"There's no going back, George," Nick said. His voice was sharp. "You already know how this is gonna go. They're all gonna hate your guts. But you have to dig your heels in and not give them anything, okay? Not a single inch."

George swallowed. "Trust me. I know."

"Alright. Then let's go."

Nick tapped a sequence into the keypad, and George's stomach lurched as the cockpit peeled back. He was at the Temple. And his reception was going to be about as jovial and friendly as his exile had been.

George took a shuddering breath, then slid out of the cockpit. A voice suddenly appeared in his head and started whispering in his ear. *Chin up, shoulders back. Don't show fear. You're not a padawan under their thumb anymore; you're a grown man. You survived in the Underworld, and now, you're facing them as an equal. You've fought tougher battles defending your shop.*

While George didn't really believe everything that the voice was saying, its advice was sound. So

he squared his shoulders and followed Nick to the waiting crowd of Jedi. There were a couple of curious padawans that George longed to smile at, but knowing his luck, that would somehow get him thrown in jail.

Suddenly, George's eyes were pulled a spot behind the crowd. Two men stood next to the steps of the Temple, watching him.

No, not two men. A Jedi and his padawan. George had no idea who the kid was; he was tall and lanky, with messy, light blond hair and a confused look on his face. But the Jedi... he had wavy brown hair that flopped over his eyes, and something in the smile lines of his face was achingly familiar.

*Wilbur?*

Then George stood before much more stoic Jedi, and he had no time for second thoughts.

"It's good to see you again, Padawan. I thought that with your last departure, you'd be gone for good."

This came from an older Jedi in dark blue robes that George recognized from his final hearing. George didn't remember the man's name, but he remembered the face. And he remembered that his man had voted in favor of his exile.

"I'm not back, Master," George said stiffly. "I'm here because of Knight Sarnap's order of protection."

"At least you call him by the proper name," another Jedi sniffed. "I was worried that perhaps you would address him by his hidden name. Such things aren't talked about in the *Underworld*, after all."

*Hidden names. Such bullshit.*

"Of course not, Master," George said, just as stiffly as the first time. If these assholes were going to try to drag him through the mud, then he wasn't going to budge.

"Hey, I'll be right back."

Nick's whisper drove sharp needles of terror through George's heart. *What?* he wanted to shriek. *Don't leave me!* But he could only watch, helpless, as Nick strode towards the Master and Padawan duo that George had noticed before.

"Have you been taking care of yourself, Padawan?" a middle-aged Jedi asked. She looked mildly familiar, but then again, all these Jedi looked familiar.

"I'm not a padawan," George corrected. "I'm an engineer. And yes, I'm fine. Thank you, Master."

More questions immediately flooded into the space of ones he'd already answered, and George found himself standing in the Council's judgment hall, four years younger. He stared up at the Jedi Masters that he'd once called mentors as they all turned on him, each one of their questions accusatory and damning.

"*Did you have any foresight as to the consequences of your actions?*" one of the Jedi boomed.

"*No!*" George shouted. He heard his voice crack with desperation. "*Of course I didn't! If I did, I wouldn't have-*"



*“Were you malicious in your intentions?”*

*“No! I wasn't trying to hurt anyone!”*

*“Padawan, you are not giving us sufficient evidence to see your 'not guilty' plea as truth.”*

Somewhere in the present, George's hands started to shake. *What do you want me to say?* he thought, in unison with the scream in his head. He'd replayed this hearing thousands of times over. *You asked for the truth, and I gave it to you. What would convince you of my innocence?*

Nothing, as it would turn out.

*“Padawan, we see you guilty to the first-degree. You are hereby exiled from the Order, never to return under threat of further and more severe punishment. You will be stripped of your lightsaber, your robes, and everything else that connects you to the Jedi. You have a day to pack your things and leave. If you are not gone, then you will be evicted by force. Dismissed.”*

George emerged from the past and found that no one had noticed his waking nightmare. While he'd been lost in memories, his mouth had been robotically answering questions. Nick had also reappeared at his side, but it did little to calm George's raging mind. It felt like he was in the Underworld again. He'd hoped to escape all the poking and prodding that came from too-curious customers, but fate clearly wasn't on his side.

What had he expected, really? Fate hadn't been on his side for years.

For another half an hour, George accepted the questioning without complaint. But then, something changed. A new presence entered the mix – someone powerful and determined, with emotions that burned like a fire under their skin. At first, George didn't recognize the presence (he barely had time to notice the change amongst all the questions). But then, someone reached the steps, and George's tongue stopped working.

Distinctly green. Fiery and ambitious, steadfast and commanding. Loyal to a fault. Angry enough to burn someone to ashes.

*Oh, gods, no, I thought I'd have more time! Why couldn't I have slipped away for once in my life?!*

“Nick, get me out of here,” George hissed.

Nick frowned and leaned closer to him. “What?”

*“Get me-”*

Too late. The crowd of Jedi had noticed the new arrival as well, and they parted like a wave. And then... the world froze. Time slowed down to nothing as a man in long green robes stepped out of George's past and placed himself into George's present.

He was taller. Much taller, George assumed that he was over six feet. A lightsaber hung in his belt, and he walked with the confidence of a lifelong warrior. His padawan braid was gone, and his sandy blond hair had grown out, now falling around his face in gentle waves.

But most striking was the white mask. It was simple and plain, with a neat smiley face drawn onto it. The smiley face was a strange addition, especially since the mask wasn't even fitted. It curved over the man's face in neat convex. The mask was just bizarre overall, as it didn't even cover the man's mouth, only his eyes and nose.

*I wish I could see his face*, George thought absently, the only coherent thought in a sea of panicked babbling. *I want to see how much he's changed.*

The man stopped at the bottom of the steps, and every trace of nostalgia abandoned George's mind. Oh, Tibulta, he had to leave. He was about to be murdered, and Nick wouldn't be able to save him.

"His name is Dream," Nick whispered urgently, breaking George out of his downhill spiral.

"What?" George hissed back. The man was approaching them now, far too quickly for George's liking.

*"His public name is-"*

"George."

George flatlined right then and there. He felt like he was drowning – drowning in everything that he'd tried so hard to let go of and move on from. This was why George had never wanted to come back to the Temple and the Order. This was why he had been content to live in the Underworld, making his own way.

Dream stopped directly in front of him. Their height difference made George sick. He wanted to back away from the taller man's ferocious presence and beg for mercy.

*"The Dark Side whispered to you, telling you to follow the path of evil, and you followed its temptings with no hesitation!"*

*"You failed the only test that truly matters: remaining balanced."*

*"Your weak spirit is what led to this, Padawan. Always remember that."*

*"You are not worthy of being a Jedi."*

Rage bloomed in George's chest like a phoenix being reborn. Who cared if these assholes were still angry at him? They thought *they* were the only victims? No. George had gotten kicked out of the only place he'd ever called home and told that he was a failure – by the supposed "peacekeepers" and "humanitarians" of the galaxy. Let Dream do whatever he wanted. George was done hiding.

George tipped his chin up at the taller man. "Master Dream," he said coolly.

If Dream was surprised that George knew his name, he didn't show it. "You came back."

"Didn't have much of a choice, did I?"

George stared at the blank mask obscuring the taller man's face. Once upon a time, this had been one of his best friends. George couldn't imagine it now. While he had fallen to become the quintessential example of the Order's rejects, Dream had risen to become the pinnacle of Jedi perfection.

*You caved to them, didn't you?* George thought, glaring at where Dream's eyes should have been. *You always told me that you'd be different. You aren't. You turned out exactly the same as them.*

Just to be petty, George launched his thoughts at Dream with all the mental focus he possessed. To his great surprise, Dream flinched as if he'd been struck. Wait, had he actually projected his thoughts?

"Dream, do you have anything to ask this newcomer?" one of the Jedi asked.

Dream was quiet for a moment. Then he turned to the Jedi that had addressed him. "How long have you been out here?" he asked. His voice was devoid of any emotion beyond chilly disinterest. George vividly remembered when Dream used to laugh.

"Perhaps an hour," the same Jedi answered.

Dream returned his gaze to George. "Then, no, I have nothing to ask. I'm sure you've covered all the basics. I don't need to know anything else."

*I doubt that, George thought, a hint of scorn lacing the thought. You wanted to know absolutely everything when I left.*

Dream flinched again. If George didn't know better, he would say that Dream had heard him. George didn't understand. Could Dream actually hear him? And if he could, why hadn't anyone else?

Then Dream crossed his arms, and George inhaled sharply. This was grudges and anger and karma four years in the making. George had no choice but to accept whatever hell Dream had planned out for him. But, as George stood there, mentally bracing himself for the storm, nothing happened. Dream was still, as if he was waiting for someone else to start the conversation.

Suddenly, sadness pricked at George's mind. At first, George pressed what little mental shields he had against the foreign emotion. But it did nothing but drift passively, just outside of George's grasp.

George could only hold out for a couple of seconds before he caved to his curiosity and allowed the emotion beyond his shields. He had no idea who it belonged to, but maybe it would give him insight into how the Jedi felt about him.

The sadness swirled around his head, gut-wrenchingly potent and undeniably familiar. With the sadness came longing and whispered thoughts that definitely didn't belong to the Jedi that had questioned him.

*I've missed you so much. Gods, why did it have to be this way? I wish I'd been off-planet. I could have come back and found you by myself. You look so, so different. But... it's a good different. A really good different. I wish I could see you smile again.*

And then, everything retreated as if sucked away by a vacuum. George stifled a gasp as the barest hint of a green presence touched his mind. Had... had those been Dream's thoughts?

"Dream! Wait a minute!"

George flinched. No, no, not *another* Jedi.

Then George's brain recognized the voice, and genuine joy flurried to life in his chest.

A second later, Philza came hurrying down the steps. Same robes, same haircut, same signature bucket hat. Nothing about the man was different. In all the turmoil of the past hour, George was relieved to see a truly familiar face.

Philza stumbled to a stop when he saw Dream standing in the middle of the runway. "Dream, I told you to wait for me," he sighed, his voice laced with irritation. Then his eyes landed on George, and a grin lit up his face. "George! You're-" He quickly cut himself off. He cleared his throat, and his expression dropped into a mask of cool professionalism.

*I wonder if he's on the Council yet,* George thought absently, as Philza strode up to him and Dream. *He should be. He would do so much good.*

“Dream, you can't be out here,” Philza muttered. He spoke just loudly enough for George to hear him, and George wondered if that was intentional. “The Council doesn't even want you talking to George yet. They're calling an emergency meeting tomorrow morning, and they want you there. But until then, go back to your room. Go anywhere. Just get out of here.”

Dream glanced at George. Sadness and longing crept back into George's mind, and this time, he was almost positive that the accompanying thoughts belonged to Dream.

*I promise that I'll make things right. I won't let this be the end, not after so long.*

“Of course, Philza,” Dream said. His voice was still sharp with ice-cold aloofness. He looked to the rest of the Jedi, who all took a collective step back. “Clear out! This welcome is over.”

Dream turned and swept off the runway. George felt like he'd just been sentenced to death by a king.

Philza watched Dream go with visible concern. Then he turned to George and squeezed his shoulder. “It's great to see you again,” he said quietly. “I'm so sorry about Dream.” For a moment, his trademark smile flickered across his face. “None of us are allowed to visit you today, but I promise that we'll give you a proper welcome tomorrow. You have a lot of friends that want to see you again.”

Despite the melancholy and anger and confusion that threatened to crush his lungs, George smiled. Philza was the only glow of blessed warmth in an otherwise inhospitable world. “Thank you,” he murmured.

And then Philza was gone, hurrying after Dream. It didn't look right. George remembered when Dream had been the one trailing Philza, trying to get the newly appointed Jedi Knight to teach him an advanced lightsaber technique.

Speaking of Dream, George had no idea what the hell had happened between them. His Force sensitivity was clearly on the fritz, and that was something easily fixed. He would just ignore his connection to the Force until it went away again. But as for Dream's thoughts... George couldn't ignore those. Giving himself hope was dangerous, and as such, he'd learned to live without it for a very long time. But... was it possible that Dream didn't hate him?

It was such a foreign concept that George didn't even know how to process it.

“I'm gonna punch Dream in the nose,” Nick growled under his breath. “Who does he think he is, dismissing us like that? I was the same fucking rank as him for a long-ass time!”

George stirred from his thoughts. “Don't fight him,” he muttered back. “It's not worth it.”

“Oh, I'm not defending you; this is totally for me. That was *my* ego that he just threw on the floor and crushed into pieces with his perfectly polished boots.”

George snorted. No matter how much he'd grown up, Nick hadn't changed. It wasn't a bad thing, though. The younger man was George's lifeline. He wouldn't have made it through an hour of Jedi questioning without Nick by his side.

After Dream's dramatic exit, the Jedi had begrudgingly started to clear out. They drifted off the runway one by one, and George was happy to see them go. Eventually, he was the only one left.

Nick was pulling his ship into a hangar, and the Jedi-that-might-have-been-Wilbur was nowhere to be seen. Everyone was finally gone.

No, wait, not everyone. A boy, probably around 15 or 16, sat on the steps leading into the Temple.

“Hello,” George called hesitantly, as he approached the kid. “Weren't you supposed to leave?”

The boy looked up. He had short, brown hair and wide blue eyes that searched George as he walked up. His robes were plain, and his hands were unscarred. Definitely a padawan, one with a kind master. But the kid's eyes were filled with an intelligence that sparked an instinctive wariness in George.

“My master says I only have to leave when he tells me to,” the kid said evenly. “And I wasn't part of your welcome, so that means I'm allowed to stay.”

Panic clenched George's stomach. “You're Dream's padawan?” he asked hoarsely. Was the universe going to doubly curse him? A very confusing encounter with Dream, and now, a conversation with his padawan?

The answer was yes.

The kid nodded cheerily, and George had the sudden urge to jump off the runway. Stumbling his way through a standoff with Dream was one thing, but facing down a budding padawan that had been brainwashed with Dream's personal vendetta was another entirely.

“Yeah. I'm Tubbo.”

Tubbo held out a hand, a cheerful smile on his face.

Well. Not what George had been expecting.

“It's nice to meet you, Tubbo,” George said, and he was surprised to find that he meant it. “I don't suppose you'd know where I can stay?”

Tubbo grinned. “Follow me.”

Tubbo stood and hurried up the steps. George hesitated just a moment before following him. They were quiet for the first few corridors, the sound of their footsteps bouncing around the tall ceiling. A couple of people gave George curious looks as they walked past, but beyond that, he didn't receive any unwanted attention.

At last. Some peace.

“Can I call you George?” Tubbo asked suddenly.

George found himself smiling. “Yeah. What else would you call me?”

“I dunno. I thought you might have a nickname you prefer.”

“I did, actually. But no one's used it in years. George is fine.”

“Okay.”

More silence. George could just about hear Tubbo's curiosity. Eventually, the padawan huffed and asked,

“What's the deal with you and Master Dream?”

George considered the question. “That's very vague,” he said, deciding that being equally vague might get him out of this conversation. “What do you mean by 'what's the deal'?”

Tubbo flapped a hand impatiently. “You were staring at each other down on the runway, so clearly you have history,” the padawan said in a rush. “Look, no one will tell me anything about you, and it's really, really annoying. Everyone says you're important, but no one says *why*. I know this sounds weird, since you don't even know me, but I *know* you have a story. And I'm... I'm just really curious. What happened between you and my Master?”

Did George really want to talk to this energetic padawan? *Dream's* energetic padawan?

Tubbo's face suddenly fell. “I don't know what happened to Master Dream out there,” he said, almost in a whisper. “I've never seen him like that before. It didn't...”

“It didn't sound like him, did it?” George finished quietly.

Tubbo glanced at him. “Yeah. Exactly.”

George looked away from the padawan's piercing gaze. He wasn't going to tell Tubbo anything that might get either of them in trouble; that was just idiotic. But... George empathized. Tubbo's master was wrapped up in a narrative that had spanned years, and yet, Tubbo himself had never been told anything. That was a big slap in the face.

*I'm going to regret this*, George thought. But he sighed and asked aloud,

“What do you know about me?”

Tubbo was quiet for a couple of seconds. “Just the basics,” he admitted. “You were exiled because of some big scandal, and Master Dream wasn't too happy with how you left, or something. You've been gone- I mean, you haven't been back here in years. That's about it.”

Despite Tubbo's efforts to skim over his slip-up, George picked up on it immediately. “What were you going to say?” he asked. “You know how long I've been gone?”

Tubbo cleared his throat nervously. “I mean, yeah. It's been four or five years, I think most people know that.”

“That's not what you were going to say.”

Silence stretched between them. George was content to let the padawan stew. If there was one thing he knew, it was that padawans could never stay quiet. Their restless energy always got the better of them, sooner or later.

Sure enough, Tubbo cracked within the minute.

“You've been gone four years, two months, and three days,” the brown-haired boy muttered.

George blinked. That was incredibly specific. Even *he* didn't know the exact number of days he'd been gone from the Temple. He could figure it out with a calendar and calculator, but still. How did a padawan know-

*Oh.*

“Dream did tell you something, didn't he?” George asked quietly. “But not directly.”

A look passed over Tubbo's face. It was a look George had seen on his friends' faces many times before, and it read, "I know something I'm not supposed to, but I can't tell anyone about it because then I'll get in trouble."

"I don't know anything."

"Clearly, you know something."

"No, I don't."

"Yes, you do."

Tubbo looked away, and George felt like he was a padawan again, trying to talk to a youngling that had just learned what defiance was. Back then, George would gently pry at the youngling's mind until they caved and told him what their problem was. Gods, that had been so long ago. And yet, things hadn't changed that much. George recognized the dark cloud that hovered over the padawan's mind, and it made his heart ache. If only he could just reach out and tap the shroud away...

Tubbo flinched, and George shied away, startled. Had he done something?

"Holy Kantos, you are strong," Tubbo mumbled. "Your presence is just like Master Dream's."

George's mind went blank. Had... had he just used the Force? *Without even meaning to?* Gods, no, *no, no*. The last thing he ever wanted to do was use the Force again. He'd been gone for years, yet he still couldn't escape the tendrils of the Order's teachings.

Even worse... it seemed that he couldn't escape Dream's influences that had wormed their way in when they were kids.

"I guess that makes sense, given your connection."

George was so lost in his own head, silently panicking, that he almost missed Tubbo's second muttered comment. Then the words registered, and he cast the padawan a sharp look. "Connection?" he repeated. "What the hell do you mean by that?"

Tubbo's eyes widened with panic. He fixed his gaze on the ground, and George sighed. Alright, maybe he still wasn't ready to talk. But George really did like Tubbo, and he didn't want their only conversation to be awkward and tense.

"Enough about me," George said, waving a hand. "I imagine you've been a padawan for a couple of years. What's changed? Is there anything I should know about?"

Just like that, Tubbo's eyes lit up, and his demeanor did a complete 180. "There have been so many upgrades!" the padawan gushed, practically beaming. "Just last month, they totally changed the training arena! It's so much more efficient, and they added these amazing rope ladders that can carry you from one side of the arena to the other in like, two seconds! There's actually this whole obstacle course in there now! Master Dream is so fast, it's amazing. Sapnap is really good too!"

*They've always been good at parkour,* George thought fondly.

"And I've learned so much about lightsaber fighting! Well, when Master Bad is teaching, at least. He's my favorite. He actually tells us the history behind the forms and stances, and why they play to different sets of strengths and weaknesses!"

That brought a smile to George's face. "Bad is teaching?" he asked, his smile growing wider at memories of his daemon friend.

"Yeah! It took him a while to get back on his feet after the accident, but he's pretty much back to normal!"

"Accident?"

Tubbo sucked in a guilty breath. "Oh, right, you wouldn't know about that either. Uhm, well, 'bout two years ago, Master Bad was acting ambassador to one of the Outer Rim planets. These two warring tribes were signing a peace treaty when a third tribe ambushed the meeting. Master Bad protecting everyone he could, but..." Tubbo fiddled with a loose string on his sleeve, and George tried not to get impatient. "He got hurt really badly. He was on the edge of death when he was brought back. But he's okay now!"

"Gods," George murmured. "I have to go see him."

"I think he'd like that." Tubbo smiled again. "He's the only one that ever talked about you, actually. It sounded like he really, really missed you."

George's heart ached. He'd missed Bad, too. The sweet, daemon Jedi had always been one of his closest friends.

"Anyways! There was also some construction, so don't be surprised if you get lost. The biggest thing they added..."

As George followed Tubbo through the Temple, he found himself liking Dream's enthusiastic padawan more and more. Tubbo retained knowledge like a sponge and was excited to share what he knew. Also, George's initial observations had been correct; Tubbo was wildly intelligent, with a love of learning that was curiously at odds with Dream's more hands-on personality.

By the time Tubbo directed George towards the visitor quarters, George was sad to see the padawan go.

*Tubbo will be an incredible Jedi,* George thought, waving goodbye to the boy in question. *He's already a good padawan.*

George turned to the visitor quarters and heaved a deep sigh. If only his first meeting with Tubbo's master had gone as well.

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When Nick returned from parking his ship in the hangar, he found the runway devoid of life. His first thought was one of utter panic.

Gods, had some Jedi with a grudge already carried George off? Nick had no idea where he was! And his Force connection to George wasn't strong enough to find him! (Nick had tried to worm a couple of threads into George's mind on their flight back, but George's mental shields had been stronger than Nick had expected. *Of course* that was the only thing the former padawan had retained.)

*Where'd you go, George?* Nick thought desperately.

Then a man detached himself from the shadows of the Temple, descending the steps one silent footfall at a time.



“Don't worry, Sapnap, George is fine,” Techno said. “Tubbo took him into the Temple.”

Nick scowled. “And, what, you just stood there? Let him walk in without any kind of protection?”

Techno reached the bottom of the steps and wandered over. “Yeah. Everybody likes Tubbo, nobody's gonna try anything with him around.”

That was true. Even the crankiest Jedi smiled when they saw Tubbo racing through the halls.

“Did George see you?” Nick asked wearily.

“No. It's probably good that he didn't see me during his first hour back.”

His fear for George quelled, Nick let out a heavy breath. In Tibulta's Name, he'd expected a terrible day, but everything had gone so much worse than he'd expected. And *Dream*... Nick was going to punch Dream in his pristine mask. He understood that Dream wanted to protect his “public identity.” But Mother of Noz, Nick would make Dream regret treating George so poorly.

“You might wanna stop fuming,” Techno said absently. “I can feel it.”

Nick glared at the pig Jedi. “Don't tell me you're okay with how Dream acted.”

“No, I thought he was being dramatic. But I'm not really the best person to ask.”

Something about Techno's monotone answer made Nick's shoulders slump. He felt suddenly exhausted, as if every single ounce of concern and stress that he'd been carrying now physically rested on his shoulders. Nick needed a nap. Or breakfast. Or breakfast, and then a nap. Anything to make him forget how badly George's return had gone.

“You know he was pretending, right?”

Nick glanced at Techno. The pig Jedi was looking back at him, face impassive.

“Who was pretending?” Nick asked, confused.

“Dream. You couldn't tell?”

Nick shook his head slowly, and guilt pricked at his heart. Nick had never been very good at empathy (at least when it came to the Force). Given how much stress he'd been under, he wasn't surprised that he'd missed a couple of cracks in Dream's mental shields.

The corners of Techno's mouth twitched in a frown. “He almost dropped his shields a couple of times. I couldn't read him, but... I don't think he was doing too good. He kept flying back and forth between two different mindsets. And I think he was reading someone else's mind too. I dunno who, but he was reacting pretty strongly.”

Huh. Nick would have to talk to Dream about that later.

“I didn't notice,” Nick muttered. He pressed his palms into his eyes and stretched his back. “*Gods*, today was a disaster.”

“You know, I disagree.”

Nick pulled his hands away from his face in time to see Wilbur appear from the shadows at the top of the steps, just like Techno had. Gods, did everyone know how to do that except for him? Maybe it was a Sleepy Boys thing, since Philza could be just as quiet.

“Where the hell were you hiding?” Nick muttered as Wilbur joined him and Techno. “And why are you disagreeing with me? Today *was* a disaster, period, end of story.”

Wilbur grinned slightly. “I wasn't hiding, I was just waiting for everyone to leave. That, and I had to shake Tommy before I came back here. But, look, I'm serious. All things considered, I think I think today went quite well.”

“I think you and me have very different definitions of good, Wilbur,” Techno mumbled. “George is lucky to have survived an hour. Someone's gonna get to him eventually.”

The smile slipped from Wilbur's face. “That's... true. Is there any news from Philza?”

“Yeah. We aren't allowed to see George until after the Council meeting tomorrow.” Techno folded his arms underneath his robes, and for just a moment, genuine worry shone through on his face.

“But Phil thinks that the Council wants to take Dream off the task force. They think he's gonna be too distracted to focus on the recent attacks.”

Nick considered the idea of Dream trying to work while George was in the Temple. If his behavior at George's welcome was any indication... “That's not a bad idea, actually,” he muttered.

“It's a fucking terrible idea,” Wilbur snapped. “Dream has always been one of our best men. Taking him off now just means crippling the rest of us. He has to get over himself and figure out how to work like everything is normal.” Wilbur scowled, glaring at the tarmac like it had insulted Tommy. “Kantos, I'd thought he'd gotten over it. That whole performance was total bullshit.”

“He's not a prima donna, Wilbur,” Nick said archly. Even though he was just as angry with Dream as Wilbur was, he glared at the taller man. His protective nature wouldn't let that slide. “He has a legit reason to be angry.”

Wilbur rolled his eyes. “Four years ago, sure. But you can't look me in the eyes and tell me that the rest of us haven't already gotten over it, made our peace, and acknowledged what we did.”

That Nick couldn't do. He was one of Dream's closest friends, and he knew that the man had held his grudge for a long, long time. Out of all of their friends, Dream had been the only one to never forgive George. But Nick had really thought that Dream had turned over a new leaf once he'd taken on Tubbo as a padawan. Clearly, he'd been wrong.

Being so off the mark kind of stung.

“He was definitely performing,” Techno mused. “You felt it, right, Wilbur? Dream was basically talking off a script.”

Wilbur frowned. “I thought he was being a bit of a diva, but I didn't feel anything other than the blatant hostility that Dream always gets when we talk about George.”

“No, no, something was different. You really didn't feel it?”

“No. Techno, you're about 50 times stronger with the Force than I am. Why are you surprised?”

Techno winced slightly. “I'm not, but thank you. Anyway. We can't worry about Dream right now. The Council is gonna do something, and Dream is gonna react to it. That's his problem. We gotta worry about the investigation. Sapnap, you should probably keep an eye on George. He's not gonna be safe without you around.”

Nick nodded wordlessly.

The three of them were quiet for a moment, their bleak situation weighing heavy in the air. Then Techno let out a deep sigh, and he turned to leave.

“I was kinda hoping that today would go well,” the pig Jedi muttered. “But that? That was just a disaster.”

Coming from Technoblade, legendary Jedi Master, the parting comment hit Nick like a bag of bricks.

“I should get going too,” Wilbur muttered. “Before Tommy starts complaining that I abandoned him.”

Nick chuckled, but it sounded weak, even to his own ears. “Someone's gonna get hurt if you leave Tommy alone for too long.”

“Yeah.” Wilbur hesitated for a moment. “Are you gonna be okay, Sapnap? I can't imagine it was easy to see George get that kind of reception.”

It hadn't been easy at all. Nick had spent most of the past hour barely keeping his temper in check. George's poor reception felt like a slap to Nick's own person. Nick hadn't been totally innocent, all those years ago. How long would it be before the Order turned on him, too?

“I'll get back to you on that,” Nick said eventually. He gave Wilbur a tired smile. “Go take care of Tommy. I'll see you later.”

Wilbur nodded once, then walked away towards the Temple. Nick watched him go, exhaustion and anger and hurt mixing to form a heavy ball that hung in his chest. Keeping the Temple safe was a hard enough task by itself. Now Nick had to protect one of his best friends from the rest of the Order while juggling everything else.

Nick smiled wanly. *I guess history is doomed to repeat itself.*

## Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading! If you enjoyed it, please drop a comment and let me know! :D

# Sapphires, Part 1

## Chapter Notes

We've got a shorter chapter today, gents, but this is a good one! Just a heads up, posting every two days is a little too much for me to handle, so I'm going to aim for biweekly uploads. It shouldn't make a big impact on y'all's reading experience lol

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

*This is a bad idea*, Clay thought, tendrils of anxiety wrapping around his throat. *Gods, I should go back to my room. I can apologize to Tubbo, eat something, take a shower. Be the functioning member of society that I'm supposed to be.*

But while his head buzzed with doubts, Clay's feet steadfastly carried him through the Temple. Deep in his heart, Clay had already made his decision. And it would take the entire Jedi Order to stop him.

Clay reached the Central Wing of the Temple and peered into the courtyard below. Given that it was barely sunrise, the Temple was almost deserted. Most Jedi liked to sleep in when given a chance, and those with padawans had to spend a couple of extra minutes dragging their charges out of bed. So, for once, the beautiful courtyard was blessedly empty.

Empty, except for one man standing next to a bench, stretching his legs.

Clay's stomach did several flips before melting into a puddle of gel. *George.*

After the debacle that had been George's welcome... well... suffice it to say that Clay had had a very rough night. Usually, he wouldn't break a direct order from the Council, but Clay would have torn out his hair if he'd waited one more minute to see George.

Clay slipped to the edge of the hallway, but then, his boots melted to the stone and froze him in place.

What was he doing? George hated him, and with good reason. If Clay went down there, what would he say? "Hey, I'm your former best friend that treated you like shit before you got kicked out of your fucking home. But it's cool, I'm not angry anymore! Friends?" Bullshit. George wouldn't want to talk to him.

Clay wouldn't want to talk to himself either.

Clay let out a shaky breath, collapsing to the floor. He was hidden behind a pillar, at least, so George wouldn't be able to see him. The last thing Clay needed was for the shorter man to suddenly look up.

Why had Clay even come out here? What had he expected? Really, he hadn't expected anything. Clay had left his room acting on nothing but raw emotion and a chest-crushing feeling of regret. Damn, if the Council hadn't gotten something right about him: he was an impulsive mess.

The Council. Tibulta's Name, Clay would have to use every ounce of self-control he possessed not to throttle the Council during the meeting. He had a couple more hours before he had to head into the Council Chamber, but the deadline hovered over his head like a dark storm front.

The Council had been choking Clay for years. They'd eased up a little once George had been exiled, but now, they were back to breathing down his neck. In a way, Clay had almost been glad to stay in his room for a day, just to escape their constant stare. At least Philza had finally gotten elected. He'd replaced the worst Council member of them all, so he might be able to do some good.

Something in the courtyard rustled, and Clay peered around the pillar. As soon as his eyes landed on George again, his stomach twisted into knots.

The shorter man had definitely grown up. Clay remembered an intelligent and witty, if a bit dorky, 18-year-old, with a messy haircut and smooth skin. His years away from the Temple were evident in the sharp line of George's jaw and the cutting edge in his dark eyes. Even from far away, Clay could see scars decorating George's hands, and a line of slashes traced its way down the shorter man's neck, disappearing beneath his shirt. His hair was shorter as well, a neat fringe against his forehead.

This wasn't the same George Clay had once known. This was a hardened survivor.

Something akin to shame washed through Clay's chest. Clay had always been praised as the most powerful Jedi in the Order, the natural leader that everyone looked up to, the mighty warrior that would protect the galaxy. For a couple of years, he'd believed it. Praise had been the only thing Clay had to fall back on when George left. But now... Clay knew better. Sure, he'd practiced and trained and studied for years.

But George had gone out and *lived*. He'd seen the worst that the Underworld had to offer. George knew how it felt to be his own measure of support and to still persevere in the face of insurmountable odds. Hell, he'd survived four years in the Underworld by himself.

Clay wasn't sure if he would have.

George suddenly sighed and shed his jacket, dropping it onto the bench. Clay's heart crawled into his throat.

He'd hadn't just gained a dangerous edge; George had filled out a bit, too. Clay had pegged him as beautiful the second he'd seen the shorter man's face again, but gone was the awkward, skinny kid. George was lean, and his loose shirt showed off an athletic form.

Clay swallowed thickly. Lust and guilt was never a good combination. What he was feeling was nothing more than the culmination of several years' intense emotion coming back to bite him.

But Clay wouldn't lie and say that he'd never found George attractive.

That didn't matter anymore. Clay had repressed everything for years, what was a few more months? But his heart ached now that he'd seen George again. Clay couldn't drown his sorrow in anger and pretend that he didn't care. The truth was, he cared too much. His anger was gone, replaced by a longing for a time that he could never get back.

*"Ooh, you look very dashing, Clay. Where are you going? Are you off to give some girl the night of her life?"*

*"I'm not going anywhere, George. And what do you mean, 'night of her life'? Who the hell do you think I am? Gods."*

*“Really? You didn't dress up to impress someone?”*

*“Well, you, obviously.”*

*“I'm blushing.”*

*“Oh, come on, I barely 'dressed up'. I just didn't want to wear robes for once in my life. And if I happened to come and find you, because I wanted to show off how good I look... I mean, you can't blame me for that!”*

*“Hmm. Fair enough, I guess. Well, I meant it before, you are very dashing. Did you cut your hair, too?”*

*“Maybe.”*

*“Aww, Clay, I didn't know you cared so much about my opinion of you.”*

*“Oh my gods. I'm going to leave if you keep making fun of me.”*

*“Sure. I know you love me, you wouldn't leave.”*

*“I totally would.”*

*“Uh-huh.”*

*“Shut up, Georgie.”*

Down in the courtyard, George stretched his arms over his head. The two conflicting versions of George made Clay's lungs feel tight. He had to leave before he threw himself into the courtyard and damned the consequences.

Clay stood from his hiding place and strode down the hallway. His steps were near-silent, and the only sounds he made came from his shaky breathing.

*Don't look back, don't look back, don't look back-*

Clay glanced over his shoulder.

George was still standing in the courtyard, examining his jacket.

*I missed him. I missed him so fucking much.*

Clay choked down a pained noise and turned back to the Temple. The Temple, with its sweeping ceiling and ornate tiling. The Temple, that felt empty without George at Clay's side as they hurried from lesson to lesson. The Temple, that hadn't really felt like home since George had left.

The Temple, that had turned Clay and George against each other.

Tears slipped from beneath Clay's mask as he walked away.

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Phil sighed happily as he stepped out onto the balcony. He greeted by a brisk breeze, fresh air, and a sweeping view of the whole Temple. Phil took it all in with a big smile and a sip of his coffee.

When he'd been elected onto the Council, Phil had been awarded several benefits. Most of them he

couldn't care less about, but a fancier room with a beautiful view had been too good to pass up. Phil liked to look over Coruscant while it slept. Even on other planets, Phil was an early riser. It was a character trait that Techno always complained of when they were on missions together.

At the thought of his frequent companion, Phil chuckled. Techno didn't like much of anything except chasing down criminals, causing chaos, and mocking other people. But the two of them worked exceptionally well together. What one of them lacked, the other made up for. When it came to combat, they were an unstoppable force and an immovable object working together.

Honestly, it was no surprise that they'd become close friends so quickly, all those years ago.

Phil took another sip of coffee and scanned the Temple grounds. Being barely sunrise, very few people were awake. A couple of tired Jedi were getting an early start to the day, but they were far and few between.

Including a lone man standing in the Central courtyard.

It only took a moment for Phil to recognize the faint aura of power that drifted up to him, and he smiled gently. Phil had been so relieved to learn that George was still alive. He had fond memories of the younger man following him through the Temple, asking of Phil's missions to other planets. Phil had always had a soft spot for the bright padawan, so he'd told George everything that he wanted to know.

Phil couldn't help but wonder if some of the survival techniques he'd taught George had kept the former padawan alive.

The tablet sitting on the bedside table beeped, and Phil brought it over to him with a wave of his hand. He'd already received two urgent messages, despite it barely being 5 am. Phil sighed, drank about half of his cup of coffee, and opened the first message.

**Cho-Nal:** Since you neglected to respond to last night's message, I must again remind you that you cannot, in any way, interfere in Dream's hearing this morning. We need to be objective and precise. We cannot make any mistakes in our judgment.

Phil scowled. Did Cho-Nal think he was a fucking idiot? There was no "objective" in the hearing of another Jedi. Phil had his opinions, and he was going to voice them. Even though he was the newest member, he was still a part of the goddamn Council!

But, to be fair, Phil didn't feel like a Council member. Most of the time, when he stepped into the High Council Chamber, Phil felt like he was saving a place for someone else. On the rare days that he felt like he was actually supposed to be there, talking to the rest of the Council was like talking to a brick wall. But maybe that would change in time, once his peers got over their distaste for a new face.

Phil sighed and tapped on the second message.

**Anonymous:** Hello Master Philza, this is Tubbo! I didn't get a chance to talk to you yesterday, so I wanted to ask if you were still willing to teach me Makashi. I know you're probably very busy now that George is back, but I really want to know another Form! Especially since Master Bad still won't teach me... he thinks Makashi is too dangerous. Have a great day!

Phil grinned. He had no idea how Tubbo had gotten his private message line, but given Tubbo's intellect, Phil half assumed that the padawan had just hacked the network.

He liked Dream's padawan. In many ways, Tubbo reminded him of Dream when he'd been a padawan, and Phil had taken to mentoring Tubbo whenever he could. Dream always laughed at Phil for teaching Tubbo things that the padawan physically couldn't accomplish, but Dream never stopped him. Phil got the impression that Dream liked giving Tubbo challenges beyond his capabilities. It pushed the padawan to grow.

**Philza:** Yes, I still want to teach you! Send me your schedule for this week, and we can work something out. I have to make sure Dream is okay with this, so expect some questions from him.

Down in the courtyard, someone suddenly rippled the shadows. Phil abandoned any thoughts of Tubbo and set his tablet aside, narrowing his eyes at the shuffling shadow. How quickly could he get down to the courtyard? Maybe 30 seconds? That wasn't fast enough. There had never been an attack so early in the morning, but George was the highest priority target the Temple had taken into protection yet. Perhaps their mysterious assailants were getting reckless.

A white mask popped out of the shadows, illuminated by the first shaft of sunlight creeping across the Temple. Phil sighed and took his hand off his lightsaber.

Dream's head wove in and out of the shadows, and a pang of guilt hit Phil in the gut. He hadn't been the one to recommend that Dream stayed away from George, but he'd been complicit in the ruling. Even though there wasn't much he could do against a 10-2 majority vote, Phil still felt like he'd let the younger Jedi down.

George moved around the courtyard, and Dream's head disappeared. So he was trying to follow orders. Phil smiled wanly. *The only order Dream tries to follow is the one I'd tell him to disobey.*

Phil wasn't a fool. Anyone with a brain could tell that Dream hadn't been the same since George had left. Even once Dream had escaped the haze of anger that had surrounded him for the first two years, the younger Jedi had become much more muted. His laugh was never quite as loud, and his smile was never quite as big.

But Phil had always wondered if Dream wasn't just in pain. He'd always sensed something bubbling underneath Dream's skin, something that the younger Jedi never talked about.

Dream's head disappeared from view, and Phil knew that the green-robed Jedi was gone. In a couple of hours, the two of them would be at the Council meeting, and Dream would be his usual self, all cocky smiles and sharp wit. Sometimes, Phil longed to tell Dream to break away from the Council's orders. They didn't always know best.

And in Dream's case, there were things they didn't know at all.

The holocom suddenly buzzed, and Phil glanced over his shoulder. Techno's face was rotating over the small device.

"Answer call," Phil ordered, striding over to his desk. A moment later, Techno's face appeared in a flurry of blue pixels, and Phil smiled at his friend. "Mornin', Techno. What the hell are you doing up so early?"

Techno's sigh came through the holocom like a rush of static. *"I don't know, Phil. I wish I wasn't. Listen, I got a lead on the attacks."*

A cold hand settled over Phil's heart. "What do you have?"

*"Group of Underworld rebels declared war on the Order last night. Clearly, that's nothing new, but they're coming after us with the same stuff as the other attacks – advanced ships, flashbangs,*



*fire bottles, everything. And they've got all of level 1509 behind them. Level 1509 isn't much of a threat, but they're giving hope to all the other guys that hate us. Might be worth looking into. They could be part of a larger cell."*

Phil rubbed his eyes. "Yeah, we should definitely check that out. I'll bring it up to the rest of the Council. They might sign off on you and me taking a trip down there. Level 1509, you said?"

"Yeah."

"Okay. Thanks for the heads up."

*"No problem. Can I stop by the Council Chamber once you guys are done meeting? I need to know if we're gonna go down or not, 'cause if we are, I can't go off-planet. Calvin and Nestor asked if I could help them out with something."*

"The meeting might take a while, but yeah, that's fine. I'll see you then."

Techno disconnected, and Phil let out a heavy sigh. This was the biggest problem with waking up early. He always had to deal with issues that he could have avoided if he'd just slept through them.

Phil downed the rest of his coffee in a single gulp, then shoved the holocom aside and sat at his desk. He had a lot of work to do before the Council meeting. First, to draft a proposal for him and Techno to descend into the Underworld. That wouldn't be hard; he and Techno had an excellent track record. But Phil was also planning to be Dream's voice at the Council meeting. For that, his defense had to be airtight.

Phil couldn't let Dream get dragged around by the Council. Not when he could finally do something about it.

## Chapter End Notes

As always, thank you so much for reading! Your support on this project means the world to me, and your comments and kudos help keep me motivated!

## Sapphires, Part 2

### Chapter Notes

Another chapter for y'all's reading pleasure :) Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

*Gods, you're so emotional!*

*Do you ever think before you act?*

*You aren't like us! You're more like a Sith!*

A few of the many insults that Clay had heard throughout his life. Once he'd completed his padawan trials before all his peers and established himself as a Jedi Knight, he'd hoped that people would stop comparing him to an agent of darkness.

And yet, here Clay stood in the Council Chamber, hearing childhood insults echo back at him. They weren't as explicit anymore, but Clay still heard hidden meanings woven into every sentence. He was amazed that he'd lasted a half an hour without cracking.

“The fact remains that we are concerned for your mental state, Clay,” one of the Council members intoned. He was a droll figure, and his two sets of eyes always made Clay question which one he was supposed to look at. “You haven't released your grudge against former Padawan George.”

*Call him what he is, Clay thought, annoyed. An Underworld engineer. Sounds a hell of a lot better than “former padawan.” And why are you surprised that I “haven't released my grudge?” You told me to hold on to it like my life depended on it.*

“Silence your mind!” an older Jedi ordered. She fixed Clay with a suspicious eye. “You are restless, Dream. Correct yourself before you begin acting rashly.”

Clay nodded obediently because that was what he was supposed to do, but his mind kept raging. It was harder to keep his composure than he'd expected. Clay had thought that he could just shove his feelings beneath his mask and ease the Council's worries about him. Instead, old anger was coming back to life. Clay saw each of the Council members, and he hated them. Hated what they'd done to him, hated what he'd become, hated that he hadn't been strong enough the first time.

Even as a kid, Clay hadn't cared about the Council. As far as he'd been concerned, the Council had only ever existed to tell him which planets he could or couldn't go to. But now, he saw them as active enemies.

After all, Clay had already left his room to try to talk to George. He hadn't carried through with it, but he'd acted rashly. In the Council's eyes, he was already a failure.

Someone tugged at Clay's mind, and he quickly recognized the presence as Philza. A silent warning. Clay exhaled deeply. Just a little bit longer. It didn't matter how much mental strain it caused him. He shoved all of his emotions back behind his mask and covered them with indifference. Nothing would escape.

“Do you have any defense for your behavior, Dream?”

*Oh, now you ask me how I feel? Yeah, my defense is that I'm a human being, and you fucking brainwashed me.*

“No, Master,” Clay said, in his best “holier than thou” voice. “I let my anger best me for a time. I will settle myself back into peace.”

A wave of cold amusement touched his mind, and Clay smiled humorlessly. It gave him a strange sense of satisfaction to know that Philza wouldn't fall for the idea that he was okay.

But the rest of the Council bought the lie without question.

“Good.” The first Council member was talking again. Clay barely knew the Council's names, but he was pretty sure that the man with four eyes was named “Cho-Nal.” “Still, former Padawan George's safety is at risk. We are well aware of the animosity that some Jedi still harbor towards him. Combined with the threat that the recent attacks pose on his life, he is in grave danger. We need to remove this internal hostility, and we believe you are the source of it.”

Anger and protectiveness built in Clay's chest with a roar like thunder. Master Cho-Nal was damn right, George was in danger. He was in danger from every fucking angle, and if Clay had a choice, he'd be at George's side in a heartbeat to protect him.

But the Council didn't see that. They saw that Clay as cold and calloused, just as they'd taught him to be. They saw what they wanted to see: a young, obedient Jedi, eagerly following the Council's orders. Clay was done being their lap dog.

“Forgive me, Master, but I don't see why I'm being held accountable for the actions of my fellow Jedi,” Clay said sharply, crossing his arms. “I know I haven't been a great role model-” (Another lie, since Clay knew that the Council viewed him as the only reasonable one among his friends-) “-but I didn't tell anyone else to be mad at George. Shouldn't I be judged for my actions and my actions alone?”

The female Jedi, who had told him to shut up, eyed him once again. The hint of a memory pressed at Clay's mind. Her name was... Delphina.

“Petulance is dangerous, Dream,” Delphina warned. “Make sure you do not pass it on to your padawan.”

Clay smiled thinly. “Of course, Master.”

“After all, if you don't do well in training Padawan Toby, we can always assist in his learning. I'm sure there are many masters that would gladly share your burden.”

Rage exploded in Clay's chest. They *dare* threaten his padawan? Clay would willingly endure all the abuse that the Council threw at him, but Tubbo? Tubbo was innocent. And Tubbo was absolutely off-limits. Clay *refused* to let the Council put his padawan through hell.

“Eh, I don't think that's the issue here, Master.”

Philza's voice cut through Clay's haze of fury. He blinked a couple of times, belatedly remembering that he couldn't let his emotions run rampant. In his dazed state, Clay's thoughts drifted to his only friend on the Council. It was odd, really, seeing Philza in a room of stern faces. He looked so out of place.

"Dream has been doing a wonderful job of training Tubbo," Philza continued, leaning forward in his chair. "Multiple people can attest to that. Master Bad has a hand in Tubbo's tutelage, and I've seen Tubbo progress. When it comes to his padawan, Dream excels. And I think he's absolutely right about our judgment. He isn't at fault for the reactions of others. We're meant to support and correct each other, not be fully accountable for each other."

Master Cho-Nal squinted at Philza, which was a doubly off-putting experience. His eyes didn't narrow at the same time. "You agree with him, Philza?" he asked coldly.

A flash of annoyance passed over Philza's face. "Were you listening to what I just said?"

The Council grumbled angrily, but Clay didn't even try to repress a rueful smile. Thank the gods that he had someone defending him.

"Of course we were listening, Philza," a new Jedi snapped. She'd been elected onto the Council along with Philza, and she was already making a name for herself. Clay vaguely recognized her, as her pure white hair wasn't easy to forget. But her name was lost to his hazy memory. "But I don't understand why you trust Dream when he has not shown us such accountability. Why are you on his side?"

Philza scowled. "There aren't any sides here. Dream is being emotional, fine. Give him a couple days to cool off and get back to normal."

"Normal is not good enough," Delphina bit out. "His normal is emotional as it is! We need Dream to be the best version of himself if he is to stay on the task force!"

As the voices of the Council melted into a cacophony of sound, Clay's thoughts slipped into the past. Over the many years he'd been in the Order, he'd only been called before the Council twice (excluding all the drama of the past four years). First, when he'd been accepted into the Order. And second, when he and Nick had gotten into a fierce argument over interplanetary politics when Clay was 16.

*"Nick is such an asshole," Clay had complained to George after he'd been let out of the hearing. "I don't even know why I had to be there, I didn't do anything wrong! Gods, he's making this so hard for everyone! Our class is literally stopped right now! Who the hell does he think he is?"*

*"A padawan trying to figure out his place in the Order," George had responded, giving Clay a crooked smile. "Just like you and me. You can't tell me that you don't disagree with history. I've heard you shouting at Master Tengel."*

*"I guess." Clay had flopped onto his back, and he still remembered how blue the sky had been. "I don't want to deal with him right now. Maybe I'll skip training tomorrow."*

*"That might be good. Just give him some space, Clay. Then talk about it, get over it, and you two can go back to committing arson. Or whatever you do when you aren't hanging out with me."*

Clay had sat up and looked at George then. The other boy hadn't even taken his eyes off his book while he'd been talking, and Clay's heart had fluttered at how his best friend's eyes glowed in the sunlight. Clay had leaned over and wrapped an arm around George's shoulders, which had earned him a quiet chuckle.

*"Were you even paying attention to me?" Clay had asked, with a bit of a whine.*

George had glanced over his shoulder and given him a dazzling smile. *"Of course. I always pay attention to you."* Before Clay could scoff, George had closed his book and gotten to his feet.

*“Well, I'm hungry. Lunch?”*

“Dream? What do you think?”

“Yes,” Clay blurted, still wrapped up in the past. When he remembered that he wasn't, in fact, a 16-year-old boy sitting with his best friend, and was instead standing before the Council as a grown man, Clay mentally slapped himself. Well, shit, he couldn't take that back. He just had to hope and pray that he hadn't agreed to anything too extreme.

For a long moment, silence hung over the room. Then a Jedi that had been silent for the better part of an hour sat up in his chair. Ruffled, dark brown hair, tanned skin, and eyes that looked almost pure white. What was his name?... Eret. The man was Eret. Clay had seen him around the Temple before, and he knew that the Sleepy Boys were friends with the Jedi Master. But Clay had yet to form an opinion of Eret for himself.

“By agreeing to stay on the task force, you agree to work with George,” Eret said slowly. “You know that, right?”

Clay barely kept himself from letting out a delighted giggle. He swallowed the noise and asked, “What do you mean?”

Eret steepled his fingers. “You have to work with George,” he repeated. “He's been living in the Underworld for years. He's bound to know something that we could never find out by ourselves. Even if you aren't the one to talk to him, you're going to be working side by side. You might even have to do missions together.”

*Please, yes, Clay thought, a little desperately. Anything to talk to him. I want to try again, I need to try again. I can't let him disappear like this.*

“I'm fine with that,” Clay said evenly. His heart was screaming at him to run out of the Council Chamber right then and there, but he planted his feet and steeled his nerves.

Eret looked him over with an appraising eye. It felt like the other Jedi was looking straight through Clay, past his cold mask and into his roiling heart.

“Alright,” Eret said suddenly, with a jovial tone and cheerful smile that was even more out of place than Philza's. “He said he can work with George. That's all that matters, right? If we trust him to go off to other planets and be a peacekeeper there, surely we trust him right here. Now we just have to make sure everyone else knows that George is here at our behest.”

Clay tipped his head curiously. Maybe he had more than one friend on the Council.

“Eret's right,” Philza chimed in from the other side of the room. “So, do we all see it fit to keep Dream on the task force?”

After a long pause, Master Cho-Nal sighed.

“Perhaps Dream can work through his struggles,” the Jedi Master admitted grudgingly. “We will allow you a grace period. You have three days to make public amends with former Padawan George and advance the investigation. If you fail on either of these fronts, you will be removed. Is that clear, Dream?”

Under his mask, Clay briefly closed his eyes. “Yes, sir, perfectly clear.”

“Good. You are dismissed.”

Clay bowed deeply and turned, heading for the doors at what seemed like an agonizingly slow pace. He was almost free when Philza's voice appeared in his mind.

*We'll only be a couple more minutes. Wait outside. I want to talk to you.*

Clay didn't dare to look back, but he inclined his head slightly to confirm. Then he was through the door and standing in the hallway, the eyes of the Council finally off his back. It felt like the entire world had been lifted from his shoulders.

That meeting had been nothing short of a nightmare to sit through. Clay longed to take his mask off, just to release all the churning emotions in his stomach. He settled for heaving a sigh of relief and collapsing against one of the many pillars that lined the hallway.

Clay felt like he'd been awake for a month straight. Part of that was probably due to a sleepless night. Yesterday, Clay had followed Philza's advice and locked himself in his room for the entire day. Tubbo, gods bless him, had shown up before curfew with a plate of food. If the padawan had seen the tear streaks staining Clay's cheeks or the old scars along Clay's shoulders and back (usually hidden by bandages or clothes), he hadn't said anything. Clay was fairly certain that he'd kept Tubbo up all night with him.

*Tubbo probably thinks I'm crazy, Clay thought wryly. Hopefully, he didn't tell anyone. Maybe he told Bad, but Bad already knows.*

At least Clay was getting a chance to fix things. That was more than he'd ever hoped for.

"Dream? What are you doing here?"

Clay glanced up. Techno was standing at the mouth of the hallway, giving him a mildly confused look.

"Oh, the Council's still in session, isn't it?" Techno muttered before Clay could say anything. "I thought I'd timed it right. Okay, uh, I'm gonna wait outside. See you--"

"Philza's almost done," Clay said, cutting over the pig Jedi's farewell. After everything that he'd gone through in the past 24 hours, Clay was desperate for company. And Techno was one of the few people that wouldn't treat him like a cracked piece of glass or a ticking time bomb.

Techno paused. "Oh. I guess I'll just wait here."

Techno wandered over to Clay and leaned against the other side of the pillar. For a long moment, they sat in amiable silence. For as many disagreements as they had, they understood each other in a way that Clay couldn't explain. He was grateful for it, though. Techno had no need to fill the empty space between them with small talk.

"What do you know about Eret?" Clay asked, suddenly. He startled himself with the question. What had happened to "no need for small talk?" Gods, he was really out of it.

But if Techno was surprised by the question, he didn't show it. The pig Jedi was quiet for a moment before he spoke. "Not much. He's a good guy, though, I've worked with him a couple times. Why?"

Clay smiled faintly. "He voted to keep me in the loop."

"Well, yeah, anyone with a working brain would. Especially since it's been quiet this week."

“The Council would disagree with you.”

Techno crossed his arms. “Eh, the Council doesn't really matter. They're just people pretending that they know more than they actually do. I saw Cho-Nal walk into a tree the other day.”

Clay chuckled a little at the thought.

“Look, Dream, in the end, it doesn't really matter. We're gonna keep asking you for help, no matter what the Council decides. You're not gonna get shut out, if that's what you're worried about. I don't think Sapnap or Bad would let that happen.”

Clay glanced up at the pig Jedi. Techno looked directly back at him, arms still crossed, but face neutral. This was the most genuine conversation they'd had in a while.

“I'm not worried about being shut out,” Clay said with a faint smile. “Do you think I'm unpopular or something?”

The corner of Techno's mouth twitched. “No, not really.”

Clay settled back against the pillar. The two of them were silent for another long moment until curiosity bubbled up in Clay's mind. Since he and Techno seemed to be on good terms for the time being, maybe he could get away with another question.

“What did you want to talk to Philza about?”

Techno sighed heavily, rubbing at his eyes with the back of his hand. *He looks tired*, Clay realized. *Like he didn't sleep last night either.*

“There's some rebels making noise on level 1509,” Techno muttered. “Nothing big, but they're making waves. Phil and I are gonna go down there and check things out, make sure there aren't any major threats, y'know.”

“You sure you're gonna be safe down there?”

“And you'd be safer, Dream?”

Before Clay could answer, a pneumatic hiss filled the air. The doors to the Council Chamber opened with a whoosh, and the Council slowly filed out. Most of them ignored clay and Techno as they walked by, keeping their voices hushed and their heads together. There were only a few things that Clay and Techno had in common, but neither was liked by the Council. Clay was too emotional, and Techno was too much of a wild card. Clay absently wondered what they'd be able to do if they worked together for once.

“Look at these losers,” Techno muttered to Clay. “They wouldn't last a minute against us.”

Clay chuckled lowly. “Definitely.”

Philza and Eret were the last ones to leave the Chamber, the doors closing quietly behind them. The two of them spoke quietly, but their conversation trailed off as soon as they noticed Clay and Techno.

“Oh, good, you waited,” Philza said, clearly startled.

“Did you think I'd just take off?” Clay asked, clambering to his feet as the two Jedi Masters walked up.

Philza rolled a guilty shoulder. "Sort of, yeah." He glanced at Techno and smiled apologetically. "I have to talk to Dream for a sec. I'll meet you outside, yeah?"

Techno nodded. "Yeah, no problem."

"I'd better be off, too," Eret added. He shot Clay a slight grin. "I'll see you around, Dream."

"See you." Clay wanted to thank Eret for his vote of confidence, but it didn't feel like the right time to do so.

Eret turned to Techno, and his grin grew wider. "Techno, how've you been? We haven't spoken in a while."

"I'm doing pretty good. Haven't been killed yet, so that's nice."

Techno and Eret walked away down the hall, continuing their conversation. Clay briefly noted that the two of them sounded like they were talking in verbal bold font.

"Dream."

Oh, right, Clay had hung around to talk to Philza.

"Thank you for standing up for me in there," Clay said, giving the older man a faint smile. "I can't imagine it'd be easy to be in that room, day after day."

Philza cracked a grin. "It's not as bad as you think, to be honest. We only meet when there's big issues, and you're worth the trouble. But, Dream, listen. The Council wants to kick George out if you two don't get along. You've been their poster boy for so long that having George around is a liability to public image. *I* know that you don't want George gone. But I barely managed to convince them to give you this one last chance."

Clay sucked in a breath. Kick George out again? But... "He'd die if he left," he murmured. "Everyone knows who he is now."

"I know. So we've got to keep him here."

Clay's hands were numb, and his vision was fuzzy at the edges. That settled it. He had to find George as soon as he could and talk to him. He had to try to make things right, or else-

"Dream." Philza put a hand on Clay's shoulder, dragging him out of his head. "Do me a favor. You're acting with your heart right now, and that's not a bad thing, believe me. But George hadn't seen you in *years*. He has no idea what changed. He doesn't know what happened when he left. Take a couple of hours to get your thoughts together. Your head is gonna have to be on the right way to answer the questions he's got."

Clay took a shaky breath. Philza was right. George had always wanted clear and concise explanations when he was angry, and gods knew what the Underworld had done to him. Clay had to calm down.

*No!* Clay's heart screamed. *No more waiting! I want to see him now!*

"Yeah," he croaked. He cleared his throat, then tried again. "Yeah, I'll... I'll do that."

"Good man. And, look... everything is going to be okay. George has a big heart. The Underworld didn't beat that out of him, or he wouldn't have come back with Nick. Remember that, okay?"



George isn't gone. Deep down, he's still your best friend."

Philza's eyes were too intense, too knowing. Clay felt like he was completely exposed, and for the first time in his life, he wanted to be anywhere but around Philza.

Did the older Jedi know? Had Philza somehow figured out what Clay had tried so hard to keep hidden?

Then Philza clapped Clay on the shoulder and strode away, probably to go find Techno. Clay was left standing in the hallway, staring at the wall with tears clouding his vision and his hands shaking.

*Everything that happened... everything I said... and this is where I end up.*

---

On top of the tallest tower in the Temple, Bad could see everything. The Temple grounds sprawled below him, everything from the training arena to the padawan quarters. It was a very peaceful scene. None of the noise from the Temple reached him, such heights he was at. Bad loved this spot. It allowed him to relax and truly clear his mind, away from everyone else.

But today, Bad wasn't on the tower to clear his mind. He was on a mission.

Bad smiled up at the sun. "Good morning, Mr. Sun," he said cheerfully. "Would you mind helping me out?" The sun shined a little brighter. Bad nodded to himself, then drew a tiny, golden rune in the air. "Συλλέγω," he whispered, and the words seemed to disappear on the breeze as soon as he spoke them.

The little rune whirled in a tight circle, gathering sparks as it went. Then it imploded with a quiet pop, dissolving into a tiny, glowing ball of sunlight. Bad plucked the orb out of the air and shoved it into one of his many hidden pockets.

Technically, Bad wasn't supposed to do magic inside the Temple. Some people who weren't strong with the Force often confused it with magic, which wasn't the impression the Council wanted to give to the public. But the Council looked the other way for him since magic was in Bad's nature as a daemon. And, as Skeppy had told him on more than one occasion, Bad was just a good soul. He was cautious to never abuse his powers.

"Thank you!" Bad called up to the sun. "I think he's really gonna like this!"

The sun winked at Bad in response.

Now that he had everything, Bad could finally make George's present! He was running a little behind schedule, so he'd have to place a crafting rune on the pieces. Hopefully, he'd produce enough physical energy while walking to power the crafting.

Bad was about to leave the tower when he heard the faint crackling of fire. He paused, tipping his head to one side as he listened. *No one's supposed to be up here*, he thought. *What is that?*

For a moment, Bad just turned in a circle, confused. Then he leaned over the back edge of the tower and found a woman in dark linen clinging to the wall, climbing up to him. Bad couldn't see anything except two piercing blue eyes, which were focused on the wall. She clenched a flaming torch in one hand, and several smaller, unlit torches were shoved into a thick, brown belt.

"Excuse me," Bad said hesitantly. "You really shouldn't be up here. If you fall, there's nothing to

catch you.”

The woman let out a startled noise and threw out her open hand. Fire roared to life around her fist, then blasted towards Bad in a magnificent plume. Bad's magic instinctively tugged him to the side, and the woman's fire rushed past his face in a harmless wave. The woman's eyes narrowed into slits.

“That wasn't very nice,” Bad murmured. “What are you doing here?”

He already knew the answer. But every time he found one of these stealth agents, he prayed that he was wrong.

The woman bared her teeth at him. “I'm here to burn your Temple to the ground,” she hissed. Her voice was sharp and raspy, like she'd spent too many years breathing in fumes. “What are you going to do about it, cleric?”

Bad frowned slightly. “Medicine is very important, ma'am. You'd do better to recognize its importance.”

To many, it would have sounded like Bad was being condescending. And, judging by the way her lips pulled back in a snarl, that's how the woman took his words. But Bad was only trying to make conversation. He wanted this woman to see that she was a person to him and not just an agent of death and war. Sometimes, a simple connection was enough to save lives.

But the woman was already reaching for a torch from her belt.

Bad knew how this was going to end.

“May you be the first to burn,” the woman growled. She drew in a breath, probably to create a rampant blaze that would be untouchable to water and foam and everything else that the Jedi threw at it. But her fire never even touched the Temple.

Bad's chest tightened as soon as the woman took a breath. “I'm sorry,” he whispered. He drew a dark red rune in the air and breathed, “*Παύδα*.”

A sphere of red energy closed around the woman just in time, and she was engulfed in a wreath of fire. The woman narrowed her eyes at Bad, clearly unaffected by her creation. Then the torches on her belt sparked and caught. She only had time to gasp before each of the torches she carried exploded into white-hot flame.

It was over in seconds. Her fire was potent, and her body couldn't withstand what she had created.

Tears slid down Bad's cheeks, and his hands trembled uncontrollably. The woman's screams echoed around his head, and he knew he would hear them for the rest of his life. He was the only one who'd heard her dying cries. And he was the last one who'd ever see her.

Bad flicked shaking fingers, and his sphere of energy dissolved. The woman's ashes were instantly borne away by the wind, but Bad didn't waste his time on those. The woman's body had been irreversibly destroyed. But there was a chance he could still save her soul.

Bad spread his arms wide and reached out to the Force. Immediately, he was flooded with connections. Muted presences wandered around below him, signifying all the Jedi and padawans that were in the Temple. Further away, the signatures of Bad's friends burned like mini stars. But where he stood, there was no Force presence except for his own.

“C'mon,” Bad whispered desperately. “There must have been something in you.”

There! It was so faint, Bad almost missed it. But it was there, and it was real, a tiny sliver of light. Bad clung on to the light and reached out for more. Now that he held a small piece of everything, the rest of what remained made themselves known. Bad gathered all of the light to his chest, pressing each brilliant piece together.

When Bad opened his eyes, an orb of golden light floated before him. “May the Force be with you,” he murmured. He gently tapped the orb, and it flew away into the sky.

According to every Coruscant law that he knew of, Bad shouldn't be releasing the life force of someone that had tried to kill him back into the universe. But Bad thought it was worth the risk. In life, the woman had tried to bring destruction and chaos. But in death, perhaps she would provide good to other people. Perhaps her determination or strength or conviction would reach someone who needed it. After all, the Force worked in strange ways. Bad didn't always understand, but he tried his best to do what was right.

And his heart told him that letting that woman's goodness return to the world was the right thing to do.

Bad headed down the tower staircase. When Bad was stopped by the guards, he greeted them with a cheerful smile. When one of them asked if he'd seen anything up on the tower, Bad said he hadn't. It was the same answer that he'd given for each of the attackers that he'd caught trying to sneak into the Temple.

Eventually, Bad would tell the Council about the ashes that dusted the cliffs around the Temple. But Bad was too kind-hearted to give up the attackers' last resting places without reason.

One day. But not until he had to. Not until the attacks on the Temple were too great to bear.

## Chapter End Notes

The final part of this chapter will be out on Saturday! Until then, thank you so much for reading! Please drop a comment if you enjoyed, and I hope y'all have a great day :D

# Sapphires, Part 3

## Chapter Notes

Welcome to the chapter finale, folks! I hope you're ready for a wild ride! :D

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Nick stalked down the hallway, fuming. Twenty hours he'd been made to wait. Twenty hours since Dream had disappeared into his room, twenty hours since the Council had refused to speak until after the meeting. Nick didn't have the best temper, and everything from the past day had pushed him to his limits.

Basically, Nick was going to find Dream and beat the ever-loving shit out of him. He would have preferred to go after the Council, but they were kind of off-limits. Dream was the next best thing.

*Dream, the Council's personal ambassador*, Nick thought sourly. *Dream, the Council's golden boy*.

Dream didn't like the Council at all, and eight times out of ten, he didn't even listen to what they told him to do. But Nick wasn't an idiot. He knew that the Council had wormed seeds of blind obedience into Dream's mind and had left them to grow throughout George's exile. And now that George was back? Nick was hurt and angry and scared for his friend, and Dream was going to feel the same way, whether he liked it or not.

Nick rounded the corner and found himself standing in the hallway outside the Council Chamber. The meeting should be over, since he'd seen Philza walking away with Techno. Yup, Dream was standing in the shadows, alone. He was slumped against one of the pillars, his shoulders tight.

A twinge of doubt crept into Nick's mind. Was he really about to do this? Attack Dream as if he was an enemy?

For a moment, he hesitated. Then he remembered George's haunted, heartbroken face, and his anger returned in a rush. Yes, he was.

Nick strode towards the taller man, jaw clenched. Dream suddenly straightened, and he whipped around with his fists raised. Nick must have let something slip past his shields. But it didn't matter, because he was already close enough to tackle Dream into the wall. He pressed an arm across the other man's throat, enough to make it hard to breathe.

“What the fuck was all that yesterday, huh?” Nick snapped. “What were you *thinking*?!”

Dream sat impassively in Nick's grip, like he didn't quite understand what was going on. Nick frowned, off-put by Dream's lack of perception. And why was Dream's nose all red? What had happened in that Council meeting?

Then, as if a switch had been flipped, Dream's lips curled into a snarl. “Get off me, Sappnap,” he spat. “I don't want to deal with you right now.”

“Yeah? Tough fucking luck.”

Dream suddenly shoved Nick away, and Nick had to take a couple of steps to balance himself. He

quickly settled himself back into a fighting stance, making sure Dream was directly in front of him. Oh, how he longed to drive a fist into Dream's mask and shatter it into pieces. But not yet. He had things that he wanted to say first.

“Do you understand what you did to George?” Nick demanded. “How much you hurt him *again*? In Tibulta's Name, Dream, he's been gone for so long!”

Dream's smile was leery and lop-sided. The expression looked utterly wrong on him. “Yeah, four years. That doesn't change anything.”

Nick pressed his fingernails into his palm to keep from choking Dream out. He wanted to fight, *gods*, he wanted to fight, but first... why? What had happened? “Four years changes everything,” he hissed. “How do you magically not understand that anymore? I thought you'd changed, *Dream*. I thought you'd grown up.”

Dream was quiet for a long moment, and Nick prayed that he was wrong. Maybe the taller man wasn't really as coldhearted as he was acting.

Then Dream scoffed. “What are you doing here, Sapnap?” he asked, almost condescendingly. “Do you just want to yell at me? Blame me for everything that's going wrong?”

After four years of grief, hours and hours of meetings feeding Nick lies about how he was innocent, and a full day of agonizing over his best friend's safety, Nick's temper had been worn down to a tiny fuse. Dream's cold indifference was enough to light that fuse and send anger coiling down his arms.

Nick rushed forward and grabbed Dream's robes, crashing him into the wall once again.

“No!” he shouted. The small part of his brain that wasn't covered in a haze of anger noted that he sounded almost manic. “I want to understand! You could have changed everything, you could have accepted him! But no, the mighty Dream doesn't let things slide! The mighty Dream is a protector of the people, so he gives his *fucking best friend the cold shoulder to protect an Order of assholes*. You're so fucked up, you know that?”

Dream's shoulders began to tremble. Nick knew how powerful the man before him was, but he was far past caring. He needed Dream to hear him.

“People died, Dream,” Nick hissed. “And George was 18. What would you have done? Gods, do I have to *tell* you what happened? We lived it! How'd you forget?! Did you spend too many hours with the Council, the fucking idiots that tried to tell us we didn't do anything wrong? Did you start to believe them, huh?”

“Sapnap,” Dream croaked. “I- No, I-”

On any other day, Nick would have stopped. He would have noticed that Dream wasn't shaking from power; he was shaking from emotions that leaked through his mental shields like a broken faucet. But Nick couldn't stop. He was blind to everything except for making Dream understand the anger that Nick had kept bottled up inside.

“Do you remember the screams, Dream? You remember?” A harsh laugh bubbled up in Nick's chest. “I can't forget them. I still hear them when I can't sleep. I still see their faces. Do you think George hears them? Do you think he forgot, too? Do you think he forgave himself and blamed us for everything? Because I sure as hell don't think that's what he did!”

“I didn't fucking forget!”

Dream's shout echoed around the hallway, distorting each time it bounced off a wall. It sounded like the Temple itself was shouting at Nick. Nick swallowed thickly, and he tried to focus on Dream's face. But he couldn't. Dream's words grew louder and louder, pounding against Nick's ears like the roar of the wind.

*"Padawan Nick, did you have any insights into what Padawan George would do? Did he ever talk about it?"*

*"No! Gods, stop talking about him like he planned this! He didn't do anything wrong!"*

*"Padawan Nick--"*

*"Okay, yeah, sure, I know what he did! But he didn't do it on purpose, he isn't a killer! It was a mistake! He--"*

*"Padawan Nick, we already made our decision as to Padawan George's verdict. We are here to evaluate you. If you are found guilty, you'll face the same punishment. You need to tell us the truth."*

*"I am! And I don't give a shit what happens to me! George is innocent!"*

"I didn't forget," Dream whispered again.

Nick blinked a couple of times. Dream's face was blurry. Was he crying? When had he started crying? He tried to swallow, to clear away the guilt and shame and anger that clawed at his insides. But he couldn't. A ball had lodged in his throat.

Dream suddenly grabbed his mask and ripped it off, revealing puffy, emerald eyes filled with tears. "I know how badly I fucked up," Dream choked out.

But it wasn't really Dream anymore. This was Clay. This was the Clay that had cried for hours when George had left, inconsolable, despite everyone's best efforts. This was the Clay that had thrown himself into training to escape his grief.

This was the Clay that had almost destroyed himself.

"Nick, if I don't fix things, the Council is going to throw George out again," Clay said. His voice cracked on every other word, and his whole body shook. "Even if, by some miracle of the gods, he forgives me, someone could kill him tomorrow, and the Council won't do a damn thing.

"I thought George was dead, okay? I want to *hug* him. I want to see him smile again. But I'm damned no matter what I do. There's nowhere for me to go, Nick. The Council wants me to make amends, and gods, I will. But they'll never let me get close to him. They'll want to know everything I said to him, and they see everything. And I'm just so scared that George is going to die without ever knowing that I missed him *so fucking much*."

Clay took a gasping breath, and Nick realized that he was shaking, too.

"I don't know what to do, Nick," Clay whispered. "I don't know what's left for me to do."

It was ironic, really. Years ago, when George had first left, Nick and Clay had had a nearly identical conversation. It had been midnight, with Clay sobbing into his arms while Nick carefully re-bandaged the bleeding wounds on Clay's shoulders.

*"Is he even going to survive?"* Clay had sniffled, voice ragged. *"They didn't give him anything, and*

*his room is totally empty. It's like he never existed!"*

Nick had swallowed his tears and replied, *"He's going to make it, Clay. He'll come back someday."*

*"How can you believe that?"*

*"Because I believe in him."* Nick had tied the bandages and shifted to sit in front of Clay, meeting his friend's despondent gaze. Nick still remembered how wrong it had felt to be consoling his older friend. Before that, he'd never seen Clay so... broken. *"The Council doesn't know everything. Fuck 'em. George is gonna make it. He's gonna survive, and one day, he's gonna come back here, and we'll get to see him again. He's not gone."*

Maybe Nick had been trying to console himself as much as he had been Clay. But either way, they'd felt better for that night. The next night, they'd both been crying again. It took Nick almost three months of on and off sleepless nights before he'd able to get any real sleep.

And now, here they were again. Clay was cracked to the breaking point, and Nick was left to try to pick up the pieces without George. Except, this time, it should be George picking up the pieces. Clay *needed* George in a way that Nick didn't, he knew that. But the Council was in between them once again.

"Fuck the Council, Clay," Nick hissed, through his tears.

Clay gave him a confused look. "What-"

"Fuck the Council," Nick repeated, and this time, he shook Clay a little. "Who are they to say you have to tell them everything? You don't have to tell them shit. Go find George, talk to him. We promised each other we'd do that years ago, remember?"

Clay's emotions were started to creep through Nick's broken shields, and for once, Nick willingly accepted the foreign feelings. He fed off the anguish that poured from Clay, and he shoved it all into his own frustrations. Enough was enough.

"Our best friend is outside," Nick pressed. "And we're hiding in here. This is bullshit. I'm going to go outside. You should, too. This is just wrong, you know that, right?"

Clay gave him a watery smile. "Yeah. But, Nick, I can't go out there. Not right now. I'm a wreck. Give him a hug for me." Clay took a shaking breath. "I heard what he was thinking about me, out on the runway. He hated me. Thought that I was just like the Council. I don't... I don't think he's going to forgive me, Nick. I don't think I'd forgive me, either."

*Techno was right*, Nick thought, surprised. *Why couldn't I hear George? He was standing right next to him, and I'm not that oblivious.*

Clay suddenly shuddered, and Nick barely managed to catch the taller man as he tipped forward in an exhausted slump. He shoved his thoughts away with a tired sigh. Nick remembered this all too well. He remembered this from so many sleepless nights and training sessions that Clay had taken too far.

"I want to go back," Clay croaked. Nick barely heard him, since the taller man had shoved his face into Nick's shoulder. "I want to go back and change everything so that this fucking nightmare never existed."

Nick hugged his friend slightly. How had everything come back to where it had started?

“Me too,” Nick whispered. “Me too.”

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“Hey, Georgie!”

“What, Nick? Oh, gods, you look terrible. What happened? Master Dante is going to have your ass.”

“Shut up, I’ll be fine. Clay and I were just training.”

“Ha! You call that training? You look like you went head to head with Master Philza!”

“I can actually hold my own against Philza, thank you very much!”

“Uh-huh. Like that time he put you on the ground in, like, two seconds.”

“Georgie! Clay, get over here, George is being mean!”

“You probably deserve it.”

“Oh my god, Clay, you’re such a simp. You just do whatever George tells you to, and I’m left to be the only brain cell between us.”

“You’re not the brain cell. I am.”

“Shut the fuck up, Georgie.”

“He’s got a point, Nick.

“I give up. I’m gonna go eat. Have fun making out while I’m gone or whatever.”

“Is he okay?”

“Heh, yeah, just a sore loser.”

“You beat him that bad?”

“Oh yeah.”

“Damn. I’m impressed.”

“Anything to impress you, Georgie.”

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George laughed as Bad placed a small party hat on his head. “Bad, these are birthday hats,” he protested. “My birthday isn’t for months!”

“But it’s still a special occasion!” Bad pressed. The daemon clapped his hands with a delighted smile. “You have to keep it on! For me! Look, I think Philza is going to stop by, so you’ve got to at least wear the hat until then! I can convince him to wear one!”

The thought of Philza in a party hat was too good for George to pass up. He heaved a dramatic sigh but gave Bad a grin. “Alright, alright, I’ll wear it. But you’d better wear one, too. You had all better wear one!”



Bad snapped his fingers, and a party hat immediately appeared on his head. He swept his arms dramatically around the rest of the small circle, and party hats dropped onto everyone else's heads.

"You're so strong now," George murmured, trying to keep the awe out of his voice. "Last I saw, that sort of silent magic would have made everyone smell like flowers for a week straight. Or have turned them into flowers."

Bad beamed at him. "Yeah, I've been working really hard! I have to be amazing since I'm teaching now. The padawans don't listen to anyone who can't beat them in a fight."

The pure joy in the daemon's smile melted George's heart. "It shows," he agreed softly. "You are amazing."

After his early morning workout and the following shower, George had left his room to find Bad eagerly waiting for him. The daemon Jedi had crushed him a hug (which made George happier than he'd been in literal years), then whisked him off to a secluded courtyard. George's heart had almost burst out of his chest when they'd turned a corner and found a whole party set up in the courtyard, a cat Jedi waving frantically at him.

At first, Antfrost and Bad had been the only other people at George's little "Welcome back" party. But within a couple of minutes, Skeppy had shown up, dragging a laughing Nick behind him (though George had noticed that Nick's eyes were strangely bloodshot. It looked like he'd been crying.)

Now, the five of them sat on the multicolored cobblestone, enjoying an off-planet cake that Bad had somehow smuggled into the Temple.

"This so makes up for yesterday's welcome," George chuckled, giving Bad a smile. "Thank you."

Nick gestured wildly at himself. "Bad didn't do all the work!" he whined. "I got most of the decorations! I mean, yeah, Ant put them up. I don't understand how he made everything look so *good*."

Antfrost's tail flicked, and he was clearly pleased by the praise. "Well, credit where credit is due," the cat Jedi chuckled. "Skeppy kept people away while I was setting up. He's an excellent distraction."

Skeppy whacked Nick on the arm with a snicker, which caused the other man to hit him back. They wrestled lightly, and Bad quickly jumped in to stop them. George just grinned. He couldn't believe it. Just last week, he'd thought that he'd never see his friends again. But gods, George was happy that he'd never given up on life. Being in the Temple wasn't even unbearable anymore.

He was *really* with his friends again.

"Wait, I'm here, I'm here! Sorry I'm late, but I brought snacks!"

At the sudden shout, George's heart leaped. He whipped around and found a giant of a man stepping into the courtyard, brandishing at least four bags of what had to be snacks. George laughed delightedly and scrambled to his feet.

"I was wondering when I'd see you!" he called, hurrying over to the taller man. Wilbur laughed and immediately wrapped George in a hug.

"Oh, it's so good to see you, George," Wilbur said, his voice muffled by George's shoulder. "Gods, I thought you were gone!" Wilbur pulled back and grinned down at George. "You're short. I mean,

you've always been short, but this is ridiculous. You're *tiny*.”

“And you grew up to be a freak,” George protested. But his chest was filled with warmth, and he couldn't keep a smile off his face for long. “It's good to see you, too. Where's your padawan? I thought I saw him yesterday.”

Wilbur scowled and gathered up the bags he'd dropped to hug George. “Oh, Tommy? He's an annoying little shit, so I didn't let him come with me. I don't think he'll stay in our room for very long. But at least I have a head start.”

George raised an eyebrow. “Sounds like you've got quite the padawan on your heads.”

“As if you were any better when you were a padawan.”

The two of them wandered back to the rest of the group, where Bad immediately took the snacks and presented Wilbur with a piece of cake and a party hat. The taller man accepted both with a wide smile.

“So, did the rest of you do anything?” George asked, settled back onto the patch of cobblestone he'd claimed as his seat. “Wilbur has a padawan, and Bad is teaching three different kinds of history. Nick, Ant, Skeppy, haven't you done anything?”

The three Jedi in question let out offended noises, and George barely kept from laughing.

“I graduated from padawan, dipshit,” Nick grumbled. “And I'm only 19! I'm one of the youngest people ever to get the title of Knight!”

“I busted, like, five smuggling gangs across the Dexclan Belt,” Skeppy added, waving his work for emphasis. “And I snuck into a drug ring and bust it wide open! I've been playing spy, okay? It's dangerous work, but I'm still alive! I think some of the gangs followed me here, but I haven't died, and I still did it!”

George glanced expectantly at Antfrost. The cat Jedi shrugged.

“I haven't really done anything. Made Knight, and then the Council gave me a bunch of off-planet missions. Peace treaties and trades and diplomacy, you know. Nothing of note.”

“Nothing of note?” George repeated incredulously. “I find that hard to believe. What aren't you telling me?”

Antfrost cracked a mischievous grin. “Maybe you'll find out one day.”

The conversation continued on, the six of them slowly working through the cake. George barely paid attention to what they were talking about. He was entirely content just to see his friends again, even if they'd all grown up. They were all recognized Jedi, but their laughs and their smiles hadn't changed. The way that they brought George into their circle and made him feel safe hadn't changed.

It had been four years since George had been this relaxed. Four years since he'd been surrounded by friends and felt safe enough to call a place home. Right now, sitting in a corner of the Temple all their own, George was home. He was really home.

Tears pricked at the corners of George's eyes, and he quickly swiped them away. He was full to the brim with joy. Even if he had to go back to the Underworld after the instigators of the recent attacks were caught... it had been worth it to come back.

Two auras suddenly pressed against George's mind. He flinched and threw his mental shields up, his introspective moment ruined. As soon as he did, the auras reeled back in surprise. At the same time, a bush close to the entrance of the courtyard rustled. George frowned. Okay, he probably wasn't being attacked. But, clearly, someone was spying on them.

George reached out with his mind and poked the offending auras. The first one immediately shied away, annoyance rippling off of it in waves. The other took a moment longer to pull away, and its hesitation allowed George a peek into its owner. Distinctly green, with wild intelligence and a chaotic core.

George would recognize that presence anywhere. Alright, so one of the spies was Tubbo. Who was the other?

"Hey, Will?" George asked. The taller man hummed in response. "Your padawan, Tommy, does he know who Tubbo hangs out with?"

Wilbur rolled his eyes. "Tommy is who Tubbo hangs out with. The two of them never go anywhere without each other. Why do you ask? How do you even know Tubbo?"

"I met Tubbo yesterday. And I think the two of them are over there."

George pointed at the bush, and hushed chatter rose from the leaves. Wilbur scowled at the bush in question.

"*Tommy!*" he bellowed. "*Get the fuck out here!*"

George blinked in surprise. Wasn't that verbal abuse? He glanced at his friends to see if anyone else was concerned, but they were all just grinning and nudging each other. If that was really how Wilbur treated his padawan, George was deathly curious to meet Tommy.

Two boys stood from the bush and guiltily shuffled over to the circle. Tubbo stood hunched, and he shot George a sheepish smile as he walked up. The other was the kid that George had seen with Wilbur on the runway. He was tall, with messy, blond hair and piercing, blue eyes. Tommy didn't seem apologetic in the slightest, even as he looked Wilbur dead in the eyes.

"What?" Tommy asked defensively. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

"I told you to stay in our room," Wilbur said, his voice laced with annoyance.

"You didn't actually expect me to stay, did you?"

"I kind of did, yeah. Padawans are supposed to listen to their masters, so I've heard."

The two stared at each other for a long moment. The similarities in their stubborn glares and tight jaws were almost uncanny. As strange as it seemed to George for Wilbur and Tommy to be smack-talking each other, he almost understood how they'd ended up being Master and Padawan. He'd never imagined Wilbur taking on a meek padawan, anyway.

"Alright, ask Bad if there's any extra cake," Wilbur muttered eventually. Tommy and Tubbo exchanged wild grins, and Wilbur pointed a finger at them. "But I swear to the gods, if you start causing trouble, I will drag you fuckers to the training arena and lock you in with the regenerating droids. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, Master Wilbur!" Tubbo chirped. He raced towards Bad, who greeted the kid with a plate of cake.

Tommy, however, took a second to leer at Wilbur before following his brown-haired partner in crime. "On my life, no trouble," he promised.

Wilbur narrowed his eyes at his padawan. "Go get your fucking cake before I change my mind." Tommy cackled and raced after Tubbo. With both padawans gone, George raised an accusatory eyebrow at Wilbur. "Yes, I know how bad that sounded. But that's just how Tommy is, and that's how you have to talk to him."

Well, it looked like something had changed since George had left. Everything was about 3x more chaotic, and the padawans were irreverent as hell.

But, to his surprise, the next half an hour passed in relative uneventfulness. Their group of eight relaxed in the courtyard, swapping stories and eating snacks. For the most part, George was content to just listen. When Bad broke into the first of Wilbur's snacks, a fight broke out between Tommy and Nick, who both wanted the first candy apple. The small scuffle gave George the chance to look around the courtyard once again.

"Ant, you did an amazing job," he whispered to the cat Jedi, who had scooted to his side to get away from Tommy and Nick.

Antfrost grinned at him. "I thought so, too. I'm glad you like it."

Bad suddenly appeared behind the two of them. "No whispering," he ordered. "I want to hear what you're saying."

"You can't hear anything over Tommy," Ant scoffed.

Bad grinned faintly. "No, I can't. But seriously, move, Ant, I want to give George something." Ant reluctantly moved, and Bad flopped to the ground, landing with his legs crisscrossed. "Okay, I meant to give this to you in front of everyone, but Tommy and Sapnap are too loud, so I'm just going to do it now."

The daemon pulled a little blue bag out from under his robes and held it out to George. George immediately accepted the gift. It was warm to the touch, so warm that it almost felt like a heated rock. At an enthusiastic nod from Bad, George carefully pulled the drawstrings and tipped the contents of the bag into his hands. His heart caught as a beautiful little bracelet landed in his palm. It was made of a simple, woven brown cord (with protection runes that George remembered Bad teaching him), and a glowing, amber gemstone sat in its center.

"Bad, this is incredible," George breathed. "How on earth did you get this?"

"Magic," Bad chirped. He took the bracelet from George's hand and slid it onto George's right wrist. It settled against his skin with a quiet hiss, and immediately, warmth traveled up George's arm. "I'm serious, it's literally magic. The stone is pure sunlight. It powers the protection runes on the band, plus, it keeps you warm! And I'll have an active connection to you at all times, so even if you're asleep, I can find you. I just... I never want to lose you again."

Once again, tears threatened to slip. George allowed two to fall before he stuffed all his overwhelming emotions back into his heart. "Thank you so much," he whispered. He gave the daemon a tight hug, and the other Jedi returned it just as tightly.

"You're welcome," Bad murmured. "It's the least I can give you."

Tommy and Nick both shouted a little louder, and Bad flew to his feet, rushing over to the squabbling pair. George looked down at his wrist again and smiled at the glowing bracelet. Bad

was too good for him.

A flash of green and red suddenly appeared in the corner of George's vision, and his happy euphoria vanished. He looked around sharply, staring at the entrance to the courtyard. Had Dream come to crash his party? Or maybe drag his friends away?

No, it wasn't Dream. It was Philza, trailed by a tall man in deep red robes with long, pink hair.

George tensed. Technoblade?

"Look who finally made it!" Wilbur shouted, and George jumped, startled. "You took long enough!"

"I was in a meeting, Will, I can't make other people talk faster," Philza laughed.

Wilbur stood to greet the two new arrivals, and George watched curiously as Wilbur hugged both of them. The three of them were clearly connected, but that didn't make any sense. Philza was a few years older than both of them, and Wilbur had been closer to other Jedi in the past. The Soots, if George remembered correctly? And Technoblade was... well, he was Technoblade.

"Philza, come get a party hat!" Bad called. He was waving the last two party hats, one in each hand, and Philza laughed.

"Okay, okay, I'll wear one. But, first, George, catch!"

Philza threw a small object at George, and he hurriedly caught it. When George opened his hands, he found a polished sapphire attached to a white cord resting in his palms.

"I think that used to belong to you," Philza said. He gave George a gentle, knowing smile. "I found it in your room after you left. I wasn't sure if you'd want it back, or if I'd ever get to give it to you, but I kept it anyway. I don't know if it means anything to you."

Philza knew exactly what the sapphire meant. George sent the older man a watery smile.

"Thank you, Philza," he called.

Philza inclined his head, then hurried over to where Bad still waited with a party hat. George looked down at the sapphire again. He'd been heartbroken when he'd realized that he'd left the pendant behind. Thank the gods that Philza had been the one to find it. George slipped the cord over his head and let out a sigh of relief as the cool gemstone settled against his skin.

*"Clay... oh my god, this is beautiful."*

*"Heh, I'm glad you like it."*

*"I really do. It's... gods, how much did this cost?"*

*"I'm not going to tell you, that ruins it! Just put it on."*

*"Okay, okay. What?! It fits perfectly! How the hell did you know?"*

*"I've been learning magic from Bad. No, seriously, look. This thing helps you balance. It takes your negative emotions and gives them back to you in a more objective way. So when you're super stressed or angry or anything like that, you can have a clearer mind!"*

*"Really?"*

*"I have no idea. That's what the vendor told me. But I don't think it matters. As long as you believe it works, then it will. And even if it doesn't... at least you'll always have something from me."*

*"It's from you, I'm sure it'll work. Gods, thank you so much. You know I'm never going to take this off, right?"*

*"I was kinda hoping you wouldn't. Happy birthday, George."*

"It's been a while since I've seen you wearing that."

George blinked himself out of the past and looked around. He knew that voice, but wasn't everyone already talking to Bad? Or each other?

No, Technoblade was standing a couple of feet away, giving George a surprisingly mellow look.

"You recognize this?" George asked hesitantly, getting to his feet and wandered over to where the pig Jedi stood. He wasn't sure if this was a conversation he wanted anyone else to hear.

Technoblade shrugged slightly. "Once Dream gave it to you, you never took it off. Got used to seeing it."

"I guess I didn't." How did Technoblade know where George had gotten the pendant? "It's been a long time, how are you?"

"Eh. Just been living. Council's ridin' my ass about following the rules, and Phil's probably the only reason I'm still here. What about you? You were... level 4000 of the Underworld, something like that? You okay after being down there so long?"

*What the hell? Why is he being so nice?*

"It wasn't all that bad," George said slowly. "I was lucky to find something so close to the surface. I got a few customers from the lower levels, saw what going further down did to people."

Technoblade nodded a little, and the motion seemed strangely awkward, coming from the pig Jedi. George was still just waiting for the other shoe to drop, for Technoblade to go back to the way he'd always been. But no back-handed sarcasm was forthcoming. Technoblade didn't roll his eyes and tell George he was amazed to see him again. The pig Jedi just took a deep breath and said,

"Look, I'm glad you're alive. I know it's been a while, but we aren't gonna let you die. I promise."

"Uhm..." How the fuck was George supposed to respond to that? "Thank you, I appreciate it. I don't really want to die."

Technoblade smiled faintly. "Yeah, I didn't think so. I wonder if there's any cake left."

And with that, Technoblade walked away. George was left staring after the pig Jedi, and he watched as Technoblade slid between Wilbur and Philza and began talking about snacks. Gods, George had really missed a lot, as apparently, even Technoblade had grown up. But he'd gotten extremely lucky. This group of friends (old and new) he found himself with were good people.

George put a hand over the sapphire on his chest, and his heart ached a little. If only there was one more person at the party.

George wandered to the edge of the courtyard and gazed up towards the rest of the Temple. When they were younger, he and Clay- *Dream*-had spent hours in a nearby hideaway, tucked in the upper

vestiges of the Temple. Was it still there? Tubbo had said the Temple had undergone significant construction.

No, there it was! And... a person sat atop the tower.

The person looked directly at George, green robes fluttering around them and white mask gleaming in the sunlight. *Do you remember, too?* George wondered. *Do you even care?*

For a moment, he and Dream just looked at each other, an entire world apart.

“Georgie! Get over here, Bad's finally opening the gummy worms!”

George glanced over his shoulder at Nick's enthusiastic call. “I'm coming!” he shouted back.

“You have five seconds before I eat them all myself!”

George glanced back up at the tower one more time. Dream was still there, looking down at him with that blank mask. *I need to talk to you*, George thought. *I need to know what happened to us. Why you aren't down here with me right now.*

Then George turned and headed back towards his friends.

## Chapter End Notes

And thus concludes Sapphires...

I'm going to take a week's break to prep the next chapter, so I'll see y'all next Saturday with the first part of the third arc! Until then, thank you so much for reading! Please leave a comment if you enjoyed, and your support means the world to me! Toodles :D

# Remember to Breathe, Part 1

## Chapter Notes

Welcome back, everyone! I have so much planned for this arc, and I hope y'all enjoy the wild ride that I'm gonna put you on! I'm inspired and ready to rumble, so without any further ado, let's get started!

Enjoy! :D

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Wilbur absently tapped the screen of his holopad. He flicked through his messages (all read and filed accordingly) and transmissions (also neatly filed), but nothing new awaited him. Wilbur heaved a sigh and placed the pad on the coffee table, rubbing his tired eyes. Following the first attack on the Temple, his holopad had almost crashed from the sheer amount of messages and transmissions he'd received. It had taken Wilbur two straight days to catch up.

As chaotic as that had been, radio silence was infinitely worse. It had been a week without a single attack. Not even so much as a sniper caught on a nearby building.

It was nerve-wracking. Wilbur needed something to happen, or he was going to rip his hair out.

Wilbur huffed out a breath and picked up his holopad once again. He swiped through a couple of empty folders, maneuvering to the secret folder that he reserved for communications with his friends. An ache spread across his chest as he opened Phil's last message.

**Philza:** The Council approved Techno and me to go into the Underworld. We're leaving at dawn, so the verdict won't be leaked before we can get down there. I'll keep in touch.

That had been almost two days ago. Logically, Wilbur knew that Phil couldn't contact the Temple for fear of being traced, and Phil and Techno were the two most capable fighters Wilbur had ever met. But he was still worried about his friends. Phil and Techno were outnumbered a million to two in the Underworld, especially down in the 1500s. Wilbur wouldn't sleep easy until they were home.

*“Wilbur!”*

“Holy fucking Kantos!” Wilbur howled, and he almost threw his holopad across the room. He took several deep breaths before glaring over his shoulder. “Tommy! What did I say about sneaking up on me? And don't call me Wilbur!”

Tommy rolled his eyes and made an exaggerated show of stepping into the room. “It's not my fault that your perception is shit!”

Wilbur pressed his fingers into his eyes. He cared about Tommy, really, he did, but his padawan could be insufferable at times. Especially when Wilbur was tired and stressed, and there was a group of assassins trying to kill him and everyone he loved, and-

“Where were you?” Wilbur muttered, turning back to his holopad. “You know you're supposed to tell me where you are after 7.”



Tommy rushed around to the front of the coffee table and slammed his hands down. “No, wait, before you get mad, I have something!”

Wilbur cocked an eyebrow. “Are you high?”

“Wha- No! No, Wilbur, this is really, actually important.”

Tommy stared at him with wide eyes, and Wilbur let out a heavy sigh. After a moment's deliberation, he reluctantly waved for his padawan to sit down. Tommy did so immediately, throwing himself onto the cushions next to Wilbur and pulling his own holopad from inside his robes.

“Alright, I was doing some research-” Wilbur glared at him, and Tommy winced. “*Tubbo* and I were doing some research about the rebels on level 1509. Turns out, they aren't a threat at all. Like, at all. It's all about the weapons. They're being manufactured by some guy called Illumina. Everything, and I mean, *everything*, that's been used to attack us has been made by Illumina. There's proof all across the market! He's the link that connects these attacks to a secret mastermind, I'm 100% sure of it!”

“And Tubbo agrees with you?” Wilbur asked absently, taking Tommy's holopad to look at the information displayed more carefully.

Tommy scowled. “Tubbo's the one who put all the pieces together! Look, Wilbur, we've got something really fucking important here. I know you see that!”

Wilbur chewed his lip. He wasn't even going to question where Tommy had learned the exact details of Phil and Techno's mission. Though, given the other Sleepy Boys' fondness for the padawan, one of them might have just told Tommy everything. After all, the padawan had been dubbed an honorary Sleepy Boy himself.

Regardless of where he'd gotten it, the information laid out on Tommy's holopad was sound. Receipts, supplies, Underworld chatter, and sudden recalls of certain weapons all pointed to Illumina. There was a good chance that this Illumina character was actually a link that could bust the case wide open.

“This is definitely something,” Wilbur admitted. “Illumina is a big underground name. Arms dealer and inventor with a deadly right hook. So I've heard, anyway, that might just be a myth. He's so infamous, most people won't even try to touch him. I'm not even sure if everyone in the Temple knows about him. But if he's backing the attacks, we're in a lot of danger. I'll take this to the Council in the morning.”

Tommy's triumphant grin was radiant, and Wilbur felt a swell of pride for his padawan. He ruffled the blond boy's hair.

“Nice job, Tommy. This is solid info.”

“I- er-” Tommy flushed slightly, but he quickly swallowed and gave Wilbur his trademark “Tommy grin.” “Yeah, I knew you'd see reason. *You're welcome*, by the way. You'd better tell the Council that I found all this! I expect to see 'credit to big man Tommy' in every message that the Council sends out.”

“Just 'big man Tommy?’” Wilbur repeated archly. “What about Tubbo?”

Tommy paled by a shade, clearly horrified that he'd forgotten his partner in crime. “Tubbo, too! He'd better get recognition, too!”

Wilbur shook his head a little and ruffled his padawan's hair again. "Tubbo, too," he agreed, ignoring Tommy's protests. "You'll both get credit. Everyone will know that Tommy and Tubbo singlehandedly saved the Jedi Order and the Temple from destruction."

Tommy muttered something under his breath, but Wilbur ignored the profanity-laced insult. He returned his attention to Tommy's holopad, scanning all the information once again. He checked a couple of files and frowned as several common dates began appearing amongst the seemingly random pieces. Supplies all transferred a week ago. A dangerous bounty hunter suddenly leaving the market a day ago. Stolen ships reappearing three days ago, completely refitted.

"Tommy, how long have you been researching?" Wilbur asked, a tight feeling beginning to constrict his chest.

Tommy leaned over Wilbur's shoulder and pressed a button on his holopad. "Uhm, just tonight. Tubbo's been in the library all day, but we picked most of this stuff up a couple of hours ago. Why?"

A cold hand grabbed Wilbur's heart. "That means this is recent, all of it! Some of this happened while Phil and Techno have been down there! Gods, see this bounty hunter? There's nothing in here about their name; that's how deadly they are. Phil and Techno are in danger. I have to get a message to them."

Wilbur snatched his own holopad off the table and frantically spammed the "connect" button. In reality, his going faster right then wouldn't change anything. Phil would still have to check his inbox to receive the message, and Wilbur couldn't control when that happened. But adrenaline was pumping through his veins, and his heart pounded a frantic rhythm on his ribs. He'd been sitting on the sidelines for too long. He *needed* to do something to help his friends.

A brief eternity later, Wilbur's holopad pinged gently, lighting up with the information on Tommy's holopad. Wilbur flew through his holopad, shifting through to his secret folder.

"What's all that--"

Wilbur quieted his padawan with a glare and began tapping out a message to Phil.

**Wilbur:** Tommy and Tubbo just found this. We're looking at a suspect named Illumina. He's a black-market arms dealer and inventor. I'm taking everything to the Council in the morning, so you should probably stay down there until they decide what to do. Be careful.

"Is that all you're going to say?" Tommy demanded.

Wilbur huffed. "What else is there to say? Phil and Techno aren't blind; they'll read the files I sent them."

"Is everything encrypted?"

"Yes, Tommy, everything is encrypted. I'm not a complete fucking idiot, you know."

For once, Tommy didn't argue the point. The two of them sat in silence and stared at Wilbur's holopad as it slowly transmitted his message. Eventually, the holopad beeped, and Wilbur's message disappeared from the screen. It had been sent. There was nothing else for Wilbur to do. Once again, he had to wait.

Wilbur placed his holopad on the coffee table and leaned back into the couch. He stared at the ceiling, stomach churning. Gods, he felt sick. All of the stress he'd been carrying around was

slowly poisoning him.

But that was no excuse to be a bad master.

“Hey,” he murmured, gently shaking Tommy's arm. “I meant it - good job. You and Tubbo just gave Phil and Techno a fighting chance. With any luck, this could stop the attacks. We're gonna be okay. I promise.”

Wilbur wasn't sure if he was trying to comfort himself or Tommy. But either way, Tommy sighed and visibly relaxed.

“Thanks, Wilbur,” the blond boy said quietly. “I just... I hope they'll be okay. I hope we'll all be okay.”

Tommy leaned against Wilbur's shoulder a little. By every rule that Wilbur knew of, he wasn't supposed to encourage physical intimacy of any kind. After all, no matter how many years went by, the Jedi still weren't allowed close relationships. Besides that, once Tommy finished his training, he wasn't supposed to have any kind of bias towards Wilbur over other Jedi Masters.

*To hell with the Order*, Wilbur thought and wrapped an arm around Tommy's shoulder. The two sat in silence for a long moment, for once peaceful with each other. In that moment, it felt like Tommy was all that Wilbur had left.

An hour later, both of them retired for the night. Tommy had decided not to return to his quarters (a habit that Wilbur would soon have to break) and had simply crashed on the couch. At least it made Wilbur's life slightly easier. Not having to deal with an energetic Tommy when he was exhausted was a gods-send.

Wilbur flopped onto his bed face first, melting into the cool sheets. Gods, he felt like he hadn't slept in days. Had he slept in recent days? Wilbur didn't really know; all of his days were blending together. The only thing keeping him aware of the passage of time was a thread of worry for his dear friends. If Phil and Techno didn't make it out of the Underworld... Wilbur couldn't even imagine what he'd do.

“I'm trying to sleep!” Tommy suddenly bellowed from the other room, startling Wilbur out of his head. “Can you do all your depressing thinking in the morning, please?”

“Shut up, Tommy!” Wilbur shouted back. “You're not even supposed to be here!”

Despite what he said, Wilbur took a deep breath and began clearing out his head. The cool sheets and plushness of the mattress quickly lured him towards the darkness of sleep, and Wilbur belatedly realized that he should have taken off his robes and boots.

But, as it turned out, he couldn't rest yet.

A vicious tremble suddenly ran through the Temple, and Wilbur was jolted into awokeness. He sat up, on full alert, and whipped his head around in a panic. Nothing. The room was dark, and the night air was silent. Maybe he'd just been thinking a bit too much before he laid down, but it never hurt to check.

“Tommy?” Wilbur called. “Tommy, did you-”

The room suddenly split into three, and a bone-rattling tremor tossed Wilbur off his bed with a roar like thunder. He only had time to throw out his hands before he was sent sprawling on the carpet. Wilbur gasped for breath, crawling to his hands and knees.

“Tommy!” he shouted again.

“Wilbur!” Tommy came running into the room, disheveled but clearly in better condition than Wilbur. His eyes widened when he saw Wilbur on the floor, and he rushed over. “What's going on?”

Wilbur accepted Tommy's helping hand and hauled himself to his feet. “I don't know. It-”

Another tremor wracked the Temple, followed by an ear-splitting explosion. Wilbur grabbed Tommy's robes protectively and dragged his padawan closer.

“What the fuck is going?” Tommy shouted, his voice barely audibly over the noise. A hint of panic tinged his shout, and Wilbur could feel the fear that radiated off of the blond boy. He knew what his padawan was thinking. Would this be the attack that killed them?

After an eternity, the shaking finally stopped. But cracks were spreading across the ceiling at horrifying speed, and they had mere seconds before the whole room came down on them. Wilbur clutched Tommy's robes tighter and turned towards the window. He vaguely heard Tommy shouting at him to head out the door, but there wasn't time, *they didn't have time*. Could they even make it?

A chunk of rock fell from the ceiling and smashed through his bed.

Wilbur would not let Tommy be the first casualty.

Wilbur launched them into the window, shattering the glass with his shoulder as they flew through. They pinwheeled 10 feet down before crashing onto a broad ledge that jutted out from the Temple. Wilbur landed on his back with a wheeze as all the air was pushed from his lungs. He gasped for breath, desperately trying to clear the dark spots in his eyes. It took several seconds, but finally, he refilled his lungs.

“Tommy,” he coughed. “Are you okay?”

The blond padawan was on his back next to Wilbur, staring dazedly up at the sky. He was also wheezing, but he seemed to be in one piece. *Thank the gods*, Wilbur thought, relieved.

The sound of shattering stone filled the air, and Wilbur looked around wildly, panic filling his chest. But they were safe for the moment. A story above them, Wilbur's room collapsed in on itself with a sickening crunch. A couple more seconds and he and Tommy would have been crushed.

“Wilbur,” Tommy gasped.

Wilbur immediately dropped to his padawan's side and gripped Tommy's shoulder. “I'm here, Tommy,” he said quietly. “We're okay, we made it out.”

“No, Wilbur, look.”

Tommy raised a shaking hand, and Wilbur glanced over his shoulder. Cold terror shot through his body.

The Temple grounds were engulfed by purple fire. Some sort of reflective drones whipped across the night sky, and each roar of an engine brought a new explosion. Screams were starting to fill the air as people realized what was happening, and as Wilbur stared, shellshocked, another drone soared past with a high-pitched whine. A second later, a plume of purple fire bloomed in the heart of the courtyard below them. Two trees evaporated like they'd never even been there.

“Tommy, stay,” Wilbur ordered. He drew his lightsaber, and the amber blade hummed to life.

“No.”

Wilbur glanced at his padawan. Tommy's eyes were wide with fear, but there was a determined set to his jaw that Wilbur knew all too well. The blond boy clambered to his feet, using the wall to keep himself upright.

“I'm not going to let-”

Another drone whipped overhead, and the following explosion completely drowned out what Tommy had wanted to say. With the aftershocks of the explosion rattling his head like a maraca, Wilbur grabbed Tommy's hand.

“There's no time to talk, move!” he barked. He dragged his padawan further down the ledge until they stood above a fountain, some 20 feet below them. “Jump! Land feet first!”

“Is it deep enough?” Tommy demanded. His voice cracked on the “deep.”

“I hope so!” Wilbur launched himself off the ledge, taking Tommy with him. He let go of his screaming padawan and crossed his arms, praying to every god he knew of that it was, in fact, deep enough.

A foot shallower, and Wilbur would have broken his legs. But the gods watched over him that day. Wilbur's ankles grated on impact, even with a cushion of water, but nothing broke. Wilbur coughed the water out of his lungs, then reached for Tommy's arm. His soaked padawan smacked his hand away with a grunt.

“No more jumping!” Tommy snapped. “We could have died right there, do you realize that?!”

Wilbur ignored Tommy and crawled out of the fountain. Complaining and questioning him was basically Tommy's version of a coping mechanism. Wilbur just had to let the blond boy get it all out while he focused on what was coming next. Once he got over the lip of the fountain, he'd have only seconds to-

Wilbur caught a burst of laser fire with his lightsaber and launched it away. It sailed back into the night sky, flying harmlessly past every drone that now stared down at him. Wilbur clenched his jaw. Alright, it was going to be *this* kind of fight.

“What the fuck was that?” Tommy hissed. He'd gotten out of the fountain as well and now stood at Wilbur's shoulder, the blue glow of his lightsaber reflecting on his pale face.

“Laser fire,” Wilbur grunted, deflecting another blast. “Do you remember how to think on your feet, Tommy?”

Tommy let out an undignified screech as a response. Wilbur spared a split second to glance at his padawan and found Tommy staring at a nearby tree, which boasted a new laser burn.

“Yeah, yeah, I remember,” Tommy mumbled.

Wilbur didn't really believe him, but it was as good an answer as he'd get for the moment. He planted his feet, raised his lightsaber, and let instinct take over as a barrage of lasers rained down on them.

The next five minutes blurred into a mess of colors, split only by the amber glow of Wilbur's

lightsaber. He and Tommy fought their way through the Temple, walking back to back to deflect any lasers headed at them and avoid bombs. The only thing Wilbur was really aware of was that they had to get to the center of the Temple. That was where all the other Jedi would be. That was where he could keep Tommy safe.

Finally, *finally*, Wilbur deflected the last laser burst and dragged Tommy under cover of a short tunnel. The blond boy was badly winded, but he wasn't hurt. For what had to be the fifth time, Wilbur thanked whatever god was listening that his padawan hadn't been killed already.

"There's a big mass of energy over there," Tommy hissed, pointing at the end of the tunnel. "It's an absolute mess, but I think I can feel everyone, so it's not just a fire."

"Alright," Wilbur whispered back. "C'mon."

Wilbur hurried towards the end of the tunnel. He was so close to getting his padawan to safety, *so close* to getting reinforcements. Just a few more steps.

*Please, Kantos, let us make it.*

Wilbur reached the end of the tunnel, and his heart stopped with a horrible *thud*. He threw out an arm, just managing to stop Tommy before he barreled into the open plaza before them.

"Wh- oh my fucking gods..." Tommy put a shaking hand on Wilbur's arm, and Wilbur gently tugged his padawan back into the shadows of the tunnel. The blond boy went without complaint. "Is... is that Master Bad?"

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*"George! George, over here!"*

*"Bad, finally! Where were you?"*

*"I was getting you something! Okay, okay, you ready? Ta-da!"*

*"It's... a flower?"*

*"Yes! It's a beautiful little astrolia flower! I snuck it off Master Mazenos' ship when they landed! I thought you'd like it!"*

*"Heh, I do, Bad. But I have no idea how to take care of it. Maybe you should keep it."*

*"I'd be honored! Oh my goodness, be gentle. Hey, little guy, I'll take care of you."*

*"Are you sure you should be sneaking things off of Master Mazenos' ship? They don't really have a great temper."*

*"It's fine, Master Mazenos likes me! They even said that I'm their favorite. They won't mind one missing astrolia flower, trust me, they brought back tons! Oh, wait, I'm so sorry, I got distracted. What did you want to talk about? I'll bring this flower back to my room later."*

*"Oh, um, nothing, it's stupid."*

*"Come on, nothing is too stupid to talk about. What's going on?"*

*"I... didn't have the best night. I had some really bad dreams, and I can't stop thinking about them. Can I just talk about them? I want to get them off my chest. Let them go, y'know."*

*“Of course. Sit down, let me make us some blankets.”*

*“Oh my gods, you actually did it. Nice job, Bad. You're really getting better.”*

*“Heh, thank you. But we're not here to talk about me. What happened, George? And I can already see you filtering your dreams, don't you dare do that. I'm not going to judge you or anything. I'm always here for you.”*

---

Phil carefully adjusted his ponytail, and he scowled as a couple of stray hairs flew into his face. He huffed out a frustrated breath and crossed his arms. Hopefully, bounty hunters were really as vain as they always acted. If they weren't, Phil was going to look suspicious as hell.

“I'm not used to seeing you in a ponytail. It's kinda weird, not gonna lie. That's supposed to be my thing.”

“It feels just as weird, believe me,” Phil grumbled. Techno sank against the wall next to him, and Phil gave his friend a cursory glance. Techno seemed to be in one piece, if a little battered. Time in the Underworld did that to someone. Especially with the fumes that clawed at Phil's throats.

“Anything? It's getting harder and harder to breathe. I don't know how much longer I can stay down here.”

Techno sighed heavily. “Nah. The rebels cleared out, so they must have heard we were coming. Why couldn't we have gotten gas masks? I'm getting lung cancer from this air.”

“No one uses gas masks down here, Techno. We would have stuck out like a sore thumb.”

“And we don't like this?”

Techno was just complaining. Their disguises were solid, as Phil had a mask covering most of his face, and Techno wore a bandana to hide his tusks. Even Techno's trademark pink hair was hidden beneath a dark skull cap. To most outward appearances, they were just two bounty hunters waiting to meet a client.

But they hadn't gotten anything. Two days of scouring the market had ultimately come to no avail. And, as Techno had said, they were both starting to suffer under the strain of the fumes.

“I think it might be time to go back,” Phil admitted. “We're not getting anywhere.”

Techno huffed a relieved breath and pushed himself off the wall. “Good. I wanna get outta here.”

The pig Jedi immediately headed into the swarm of people that packed level 1509, and Phil quickly dropped into line behind him. He kept his eyes roving around the street, scanning and dismissing every possible threat. He also reached out with the Force, weaving tendrils through every alley they passed as well as keeping a constant connection with Techno. Phil had to be in perfect focus until they got back to their ship. Anything less would get him and Techno killed.

For a couple of blocks, they seemed to be safe. Then a presence began sliding through the crowd behind them. Phil noticed the tail after he and Techno ducked through a side alley and emerged with the same presence still behind them.

“We've got a tail,” Phil muttered.

“Yeah, I feel 'em,” Techno muttered back. The pig Jedi didn't turn his head at all, but the muscles

in his shoulders tightened. "How are we gonna shake 'em?"

"How far to the nearest block-off?"

"A block or two. But we'd have to double back."

"Do it. They're getting closer."

Techno immediately made a sharp right turn, guiding them back towards the block-off. Sure enough, the presence behind them followed along. Adrenaline started to creep into Phil's mind, but he pushed it away and wrapped his mind in peace. Nerves wouldn't help him. If his and Techno's covers had been blown, he would have to fight for his life. He couldn't do that if he was shaking.

The presence suddenly got closer. There were probably only ten people separating them.

"Techno, they're almost on top of us," Phil whispered. "How far?"

"Sharp left, then jump."

"Got it."

Phil followed Techno into a dark alley on their left, then launched himself into the air. The Force carried him to the top of the right-hand building that enclosed the alley, and across from him, Techno landed just as quietly.

After a couple of seconds, a dark shadow slipped into the alley. Phil immediately threw a Force pulse towards the pressure plate that activated the hidden door. It landed right on the mark, and with a hydraulic hiss, a solid steel door rose from the ground. It shuddered to a stop about halfway up the buildings, but it was more than tall enough to discourage jumping.

The dark figure looked around wildly, clearly startled. Phil pulled a flashlight from his jacket and switched it on, then hovered it over the alley. The dark figure was bathed in light. They were a slim figure, with a black beanie covering their hair and a dark blue sweater hanging from their arms. Their mouth was hidden by a dark mask, and pale fingers poked out of fingerless gloves. For being on level 1509 of the Underworld, they didn't look dangerous. They didn't even look very old.

"Who are you?" Techno asked. The throat modulator that he wore didn't change his voice very much, but it was nigh unrecognizable in a higher pitch.

The dark figure narrowed their eyes in Techno's general direction, hands twitching. What were they waiting for? If they were an assassin, they would have acted the second they realized they were caught. And if they weren't, they should be begging for their lives.

"Answer the question." Unlike Techno, Phil's voice was modulated by his mask, and it became a growl that would never be associated with him. "You were following us. Why?"

The dark figure shoved their hands into their pockets, and Phil was struck by how childlike the motion was. How old was this person? Then the figure launched themselves at the steel wall, scaling it in two quick leaps. Their hands seemed to suction to the metal, and in a beat, they were gone. Phil sighed a little and dropped to the ground, watching as the steel wall slowly retracted into the ground. He glanced up at Techno.

"Should we follow them?" he asked, switching off his voice modulator - no need to sound bizarre while talking to the other Jedi.



Techno shrugged and dropped to the ground next to him. "What's the point?" he asked. "They're gone, so we can leave. They're gonna disappear, anyway."

A nagging feeling at the base of Phil's skull told him that there was something important about the figure that had just escaped. But Techno was right; it would be impossible to find the person again without staying in the Underworld. And without seeming suspicious. It was better for them to cut their losses before someone caught on to who they were.

"Alright, lead the way," Phil said, waving at the packed street. The corners of Techno's eyes crinkled for just a moment before he swept into the crowd.

The rest of the journey back to their ship was blessedly uneventful. Phil kept himself sharp, waiting for anyone else to detach from the crowd and follow them, but no one did. People barely even spared them a glance. When Techno finally led them towards their ship, Phil's shoulders sagged with exhaustion. Two days of constant alertness took a heavy toll on the body and mind.

Once aboard, Techno immediately began powering up their ship while Phil stripped out of his jacket and mask. The ship rumbled, and slowly, Techno maneuvered them into the shaft. They were finally going back to the surface.

"That was such a waste of time," Phil sighed. He leaned against the back of Techno's chair, and the other man raised an eyebrow at him. "I know, I'm usually Mr. Positive no matter what, but that was ridiculous. We left as soon as the Council decided we could go. There's no way that that info was leaked to the rebels so soon. I was so certain that we'd be able to pick up someone!"

Techno shrugged. "I'm not really surprised. The black market is hot with info right now."

"Still. Tibulta, the Council is going to have my ass for saying we had to come down here."

"We had a lead, and we followed it. Should be the only thing that matters." The transmissions icon suddenly flashed to life on one of the control panels, and Techno tapped it with a slight frown. "It's from Wilbur, marked urgent. Sent it last night. Uhhh... okay, he's got new info. Oh, there's a bunch of files, too. And... okay, basically, there's connections between the weapons being used to attack the Temple and our nonexistent rebels. Everything that everyone is using is made by a guy named Illumina. You know him?"

Phil frowned. "Yeah, I knew an Illumina once," he said. "Best fighter I ever met. Broke a bunch of records in all sorts of martial arts, and he could fight just about anyone and win. Absolutely brilliant man. I think he tinkered in his free time, too. But this can't be him."

"There probably aren't that many Illuminas on Coruscant, Phil."

"Okay, fine, but still. Why would he have become an arms dealer?"

Techno pressed a button, and their ship rumbled to a stop against the wall of the shaft. The pig Jedi swiveled his chair to look Phil dead in the eyes. "The Underworld changes people," Techno said quietly. "We'll look at all through all of this later, make sure it's solid. But this is what's important: is Illumina capable of funding a war?"

Phil considered every memory he had of the easygoing and good-natured man that he'd sparred with. At first glance, there was no way that Illumina would have become a terrorist. But... Phil had only been down at level 1509 for a couple of days, and the company he'd kept had almost driven him to blows several times. Combine that with built-up anger or resentment that Phil had never known about, and anything was possible.

“Yes,” Phil sighed. “Illumina could be behind all of this, or at least helping. But I haven't seen him since I became a Knight. I wouldn't even know to look for him.”

Techno glared at the glowing message from Wilbur. “Well, I know what this means. We're staying here.” The pig Jedi let out a long sigh, then settled his hands against the control panel's various levers and buttons. “Alright, strap in, Phil. Where we going?”

“Try the 2500s,” Phil said, strapping into the co-pilot's chair as Techno had ordered. “That's where I last heard Illumina was brawling. Again, that was years ago, though. I have no idea if he'll still be there.”

The ship rumbled back to life, and they began rising towards level 2500. They were quiet for a couple of moments before Techno gave Phil a curious look.

“Did you spar with Illumina down here?”

“No, he used to live on the surface. Had a great little gym in the borderlands.”

“Oh. I was gonna say, I'm surprised that you managed to sneak down here without anyone noticing.”

Phil chuckled at the idea of his 19-year-old self sneaking down to the Underworld to spar. “I'm not that cool. I wish I'd done that, would have made for some great stories.”

Phil brought up the files that Wilbur had sent him on his own screen, and he and Techno lapsed into silence once again. Phil scanned the documents, frowning at the dates that popped out at him. *Three days ago, five days ago. Something big must be happening soon. No self-respecting criminal would risk moving this much linked produce in so little a time.*

Some of his confusion and worry must have slipped past his shields because Techno gave Phil a concerned look.

“You alright?” the pig Jedi asked.

“Look at this,” Phil murmured. He threw a couple of documents over to Techno's screen, then highlighted them on his own. “All recent stuff. Someone's getting ready.”

Techno's gaze turned cold. “You're right. This is all going to be used on the Temple; it has to be. What else would you use two titan-class drones for?”

Phil's stomach clenched at the thought of everything he was looking at being used against his friends. He squeezed the armrest of his chair until his knuckles were white. “Go faster, Techno. We have to get back up the surface as soon as we can.”

The ship's engines roared a little louder.

## Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading! As always, please drop a comment if you enjoyed this chapter, and I hope y'all enjoyed!

Slight schedule update: I'm going to try to post on Wednesday/Thursday and

Saturday/Sunday. If you don't see me the first day, I'll probably post the second day lol

## Remember to Breathe, Part 2

### Chapter Notes

There's only one POV this time... because this is a really, really important 6k words. Strap in, my dear readers, this one is a wild ride and I am so happy with how it turned out!

Enjoy! :)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Over the years, George had spent many long hours fantasizing about all the ways he could finally confront Dream. He'd imagined beating Dream to a pulp, being cold as ice as Dream begged for forgiveness, or simply breaking Dream's beautiful lightsaber. Those were the petty stress-relievers that George had indulged in when a particularly nasty customer had just left his shop. In his more realistic fantasies, George demanded answers. He demanded to know why Dream had changed, why one of his best friends had turned on him without a second thought.

In every single fantasy, George initiated the confrontation. Never once did he let Dream have the first word or even let the other man find him first. Maybe that was a sign of his insecurities and hurts. Maybe George was tired of letting life happen to him, and in a perfect situation, he would finally be in control.

But, as fate would have it, all of George's fantasizing ultimately came to naught. He didn't get to start the conversation, and he didn't get to pick the location. He just walked into it.

George grunted as he crashed into something solid, and his book toppled out of his hands. At first, he thought that he'd accidentally collided with a pillar. Then the solid object moved, and George realized that it wasn't a pillar at all; it was a person. He groaned internally and stooped to retrieve his book.

"I'm sorry about that," George sighed. "Are you okay?" Hopefully, this Jedi wasn't one of the many that hated him.

"Uhm... I mean, no, yeah, I'm fine. And you're totally fine. You, uh... you never pay attention when you're reading. Kind of got used to it, honestly."

After hearing the same inflection and speech pattern for so many years, George's brain recognized the voice in a heartbeat. But between the Temple's calming effects and the peace that came with knowing he wasn't in perpetual danger, George's mind didn't immediately mark the voice as a threat. His thought process was more or less:

*WHO IS- oh, it's just Clay.*

...

*WAIT-*

George tensed, staring at the floor. He couldn't have the one thing he wanted in life, could he? He couldn't have control of *one fucking conversation*.

...well, nothing could be done about his terrible luck now. At least he could control things from here on out. George took a deep breath, then tucked his book under his arm and straightened. Dream stood before him, his mouth stuck in something between an "O" and a grimace. George scowled. Gods, the mask was even more infuriating up close. It covered 3/4 of Dream's face and made reading him impossible.

No time to think about the mask. George could finally say everything he wanted to, under his terms and his terms alone. What was the most scathing thing he could think of?

"You remember that?" George's mouth asked.

*GODS ALMIGHTY-*

Dream chuckled, but it sounded decidedly nervous. "Yeah, of course," the taller man said softly. "You always disappeared into whatever you were reading. Is that the newest Ashfell book?"

Small talk? Alright, George would do a little small talk. He'd let Dream act like nothing had ever happened. (In reality, George was just desperately trying to justify his actions, so he didn't feel as wildly out of control as he really was. He wasn't ready to face that yet.)

"Yeah, it's the newest Ashfell," George said, absently thumbing the spine of the book. "Well, relatively new. I couldn't exactly get my hands on a copy when it was released."

"I think you'll like it. I read it, thought it was pretty good."

"You hate reading."

"I wanted to know why you loved it so much."

Dream sucked in a sharp breath. Clearly, he hadn't meant to say that last part out loud.

George chewed his lip, and he took a second to consider the few words that they'd exchanged. "Did you like the series?" he asked hesitantly. George knew he shouldn't be indulging Dream's evasion of the more serious conversation they needed to have, but... this moment was cathartic. It was almost like he'd just been away on a mission, and the two of them were catching up.

The corners of Dream's mouth twitched. "There was some stuff I didn't like. I thought the romantic subplot in the fourth book was total bullshit, so I get why you hated that one so much. But overall, yeah, I did. I finally found out where you learned half your vocabulary, too."

"Only took you 10 years. Did you figure out why I love reading?"

"...no, I don't think I did."

The moment disappeared. George hadn't been away on a mission; he'd been exiled and left for dead.

*I hate you!* half of George's brain screamed. *Stop pretending that nothing is wrong! Everything is so fucking wrong!*

*You still care about me,* the other half wept. *Thank the gods. I knew we'd be able to work things out.*

Beneath all the mental turmoil, George felt hollow. Nothing remained of all his anger and hope and regret except an empty chasm. Somewhere along his journey through the Underworld, he'd lost his

drive for revenge. There had been nights when he'd wanted nothing more than to set the Temple on fire. But George didn't want that anymore. He was just... tired. Seeing Dream made him tired. It was as if he'd finally noticed that he'd been hauling around a 50-pound weight for the past four years.

"What do you want, Dream?" George asked quietly. "You've avoided me for two days. You could've walked right past me." Dream's mouth flattened into a line. The taller man shoved his hands into his robes and mumbled something that George couldn't make out. The first twinge of annoyance touched George's mind. "What?"

"I said, I didn't see you." Dream lifted his head and met George's gaze. Well, George assumed he did, anyway. The mask really was so irritating. "And no, I didn't sense you, either. I haven't been able to feel anything from you, and it... doesn't matter. I'm sorry I ran into you."

George huffed a laugh. "No way you just ran into me. I was reading, so at least I have an excuse. Why didn't you see me?"

Dream fell silent again, and this time, George felt well and truly annoyed. If Dream wasn't ready to talk, then George wasn't going to waste his time. He'd waited years for answers. What was a few more days? George stepped around the taller man and started down the hallway once again, opening his book. But before he could walk away, Dream caught the sleeve of his jacket.

Radiant colors exploded to life in George's mind. He gasped as memories flew past in a dazzling array, crashing into his mind in broken pieces.

The two of them training in the arena, green and blue light coloring the walls as they spun in an intricate dance.

George and Bad having a quiet picnic in one of the courtyards, laughing about nothing.

Clay sleeping on the book he was supposed to be studying, and George wrapping him in a blanket.

Nick and George bickering while Clay ate lunch and laughed at them.

All three of them standing before their masters, being chastised for becoming so close.

Clay hugging George in the setting sunlight.

The memories broke down into mere fractures, and the images became too fast for George to see. He was left with nothing more than snippets of sounds, remnants from times long past.

*"George, did you-"*

*"Yeah, I'd be happy to-"*

*"-care about you, stupid."*

*"Must you two-"*

*"We're not-"*

*"Always."*

George wrenched his arm out of Dream's grasp and whirled to face the taller man. "What was that?!" he shouted. His brain was drowning in emotions, and out of sheer desperation to make it stop, George punted his book at Dream's head. "What did you do to me?!"

George's whole body trembled with the emotional strain of having so many years' worth of memories suddenly crammed into his head. Gods, when had the Jedi learned to do that? And why the *hell* had Dream decided to use that ability out of all the ones he possessed? (Such as logic, reason, and fucking speech!) George hadn't been that angry, but rage now looked like a pretty appealing option.

But Dream didn't look smug. He wasn't even smiling. He clutched his right hand to his chest as if it had been burnt. "That wasn't me," he stammered. "You- how- I felt-" Dream shuddered. "In Tibulta's Name, I get why people hate that now."

"What do you mean, that wasn't you?" George hissed. "Who else is there? The fucking birds?"

"No, not the birds. *You* did that."

George recoiled from the other man. He suddenly felt dizzy, like there wasn't enough air in his lungs. "Me? No, no, no, I didn't do that. I haven't used the Force in years. I don't think I could even make a pencil move. I can do really weak mental shields, and that's it."

Dream tilted his head. "That's not all you can do," he said slowly. "You can project thoughts, too, right?"

The world slowed down to nothing. George's heart hammered from all the emotion that had come with his memories, and faced with the idea of still being connected to the Force... quite frankly, George was overwhelmed. But he couldn't do anything to alleviate his rapidly approaching hysteria; he could only take shuddering breaths and pray that he was dreaming.

"You... I didn't..." George heaved a deep breath and forced himself to look at Dream. "You heard my thoughts?" he asked. "Out on the tarmac, when I first showed up, you heard me?" Dream winced, and George pressed the moment. "Did you hear me, Dream?"

"Yes," Dream said heavily. "I heard your thoughts. Please don't call me-"

"Don't call you Dream?" George finished archly. "What else am I supposed to call you, then?"

Dream's face tilted towards the ground, and George was struck with the absurdity of the situation. He'd never seen Dream so nervous and uncertain, even when they were kids. George was an emotional wreck, but old bonds ran deep, and all he wanted to do was put a hand on Dream's shoulder and ask if he was okay.

The taller man suddenly took a deep breath. He set his shoulders, and for a moment, the Dream that George had once known shone through. "We really need to talk," Dream said quietly. "Follow me. I don't want anyone to hear us."

Gods, that was right. There were ears everywhere in the Temple, even if it seemed like he was alone. George mentally smacked himself as he followed Dream down the hallway. Being around his friends had made him complacent. Back in the Underworld, he would have been dead 20 times over with how unobservant he'd been. George *had* to put himself back on edge. Even at the Temple, he wasn't safe.

Okay, back to the basics - first rule of surviving in the Underworld: never follow someone who could be an enemy. Well, George kind of had to follow Dream, but he could at least get more information.

"Where are we going?" George asked, as casually as he could. "I don't want anyone to stumble upon us in the middle of a heavy conversation."

Dream glanced over his shoulder slightly, just enough to expose the gleam of his mask. George barely kept from curling his lip. Gods, did he hate that mask. He hated how it looked, and he hated everything that it stood for.

“No one will find us,” Dream promised. “Only Sapnap and Bad know about where we're going. Maybe Ant, too. But they won't bother us. Sapnap already knows-” Dream cleared his throat, and he turned away from George. “Don't worry. The Council isn't omnipotent.”

“Sapnap?” George repeated, startled. “You can't be serious. *You* call him Sapnap?”

At that, Dream's shoulders tensed a little. “You don't?”

“No.” George suddenly felt like he stood on very treacherous ground. “I know his public name is Sapnap and all that, but he asked me to call him Nick. Said that no one did anymore.”

“...really?”

“Yeah.”

Dream fell silent, and George felt nerves prick at the edge of his gut. Gods, if he hadn't been on edge before, he certainly was now. Being around Dream cranked all his senses up to 200% and put him on high alert – especially since George didn't have a clue what he was walking into. Dream obviously wasn't furious at him anymore, but things weren't right between them. And was George still angry? Or did he just want to make amends?

What did George even want out of this conversation? Did he have answers to any of the questions that Dream would surely ask?

Gods. George was so unprepared that it was almost embarrassing. He'd had four years to decide exactly what he wanted to say and how he felt, and he hadn't even picked an opening line. Come to think of it, what had George spent all his time doing? Why had he never prepared?

...maybe he'd never expected to get the chance to talk to Dream again.

The hallway suddenly opened up to reveal the padawan quarters, and Dream paused, glancing down into the courtyard. George followed the taller man's gaze and immediately picked out Tommy and Tubbo. The two were sitting underneath a tree with their holopads in hand, heads together as they talked. They were probably plotting something.

“He's a great kid,” George said absently. “You're doing a good job.”

Dream flinched, and he whipped around to face George. George barely contained a wince. Oh, yeah, he probably shouldn't have mentioned that.

“You've met Tubbo?” Dream asked, his voice sharp.

“Yes,” George said slowly. He had to be very careful with his next words. “I've been here for three days, Dream. I've run into just about everyone except for you. So, yeah, I've met Tubbo. He has a lot of potential.”

After a painfully long moment, Dream looked away from George and back to the courtyard. George let out a quiet sigh of relief. *Alright, note to self: do not bring up Tubbo.*

“He does.”



George blinked, startled by the soft tone. Dream hadn't moved, and he gazed down at his padawan with a smile. But George couldn't tell if the smile Dream wore was happy or sad.

“He's the best padawan I've ever seen,” Dream continued tenderly. “He's going to be an amazing Jedi. Bad teaches him history, and Philza is giving him a head start on some advanced stuff. He's... amazing. I hope he knows that. I hope I don't mess him up.”

Dream cleared his throat and turned away, striding off down the hallway. The whole moment was so bizarre and sudden, George wasn't entirely sure if it had happened. He spared one last glance at Tommy and Tubbo before hurrying after Dream, who had somehow made it all the way down the hallway. If he and Dream managed to patch things up, George had to ask why Dream was so insecure about teaching his padawan. From what George had seen, Tubbo wasn't messed up in the slightest. In fact, he seemed very happy.

What was Dream so worried about?

They were silent for the rest of their walk through the Temple. Eventually, Dream swung around to the back of the Temple and headed for a very special strip of the wall. George smiled slightly as he picked out the hand and footholds that had been scratched into the walls years ago.

“No one ever got rid of it?” he asked.

Dream shrugged. “I don't think anyone knows it exists.”

Dream launched himself up to the first set of handholds and footholds, balancing himself with all the grace of a trapeze artist. Within a couple of seconds, he stood on top of the wall, gazing down at George.

Well, shit. George had forgotten about that.

“What's wrong?” Dream called.

George scowled up at the taller man. “I'm not a Jedi anymore, idiot. I can't just Force jump up there like I used to.”

Dream was silent, and George rolled his eyes. What had he expected, really? Dream hadn't lived anywhere except the Temple since they were kids. He didn't know anything except Jedi and the Force and all that shit.

“Do you want some help?” Dream asked hesitantly.

George didn't even bother responding. He pulled his staff from its clip on his belt and pressed one of the many hidden buttons. A small grappling hook poked from one side. At another button press, the hook shot from the staff and latched against the top of the Temple wall. George launched himself into the air and let the pneumatic pulleys carry him all the way up. He landed with barely a sound.

Dream stared at him, his mouth hanging open slightly.

“What?” George asked dryly. He retracted the grappling hook into his staff and crossed his arms. “You didn't think I survived the Underworld just by avoiding trouble, did you?”

Dream snapped his mouth closed, and George bit back a smile. “Nice tech,” the taller man said. His voice sounded a little hoarse. “Where'd you get it?”

George finally allowed his grin to shine through. "I don't think you need to know that, Dream."

"I- I guess I don't."

Dream turned and headed down the Temple roof, boots quiet on the concrete. Once the taller man's back was turned, George beamed. His four years in the Underworld had almost been worth it just to render Dream speechless. Gods, if only he'd been able to see Dream's face. George clipped his staff back to his belt, then hurried after the retreating Jedi.

The two of them walked along the Temple rooftop for two more buildings before George spoke again.

"We're going to the Hideout, aren't we?" he asked. He already knew he was right, but he still wanted to hear it.

Dream didn't look back. "Do you want to go somewhere else?"

"No, it's fine. I just..." *This was the last place we hung out before everything went to hell. It feels weird to reconcile in the same place.* "It's fine. Just wanted to make sure, I guess. I saw you up here a couple days ago."

Dream was silent, and George winced. All these years and he still had the bad habit of chattering when he got nervous. Why was he even nervous? George wasn't the one in the wrong. He just had to ask Dream the questions he so desperately wanted to ask, and then things would be better.

...no. It wouldn't be that easy. Dream would have questions, too, ones that wouldn't have simple answers. George had never been the only victim. He'd survived in the Underworld on the mentality that he'd done nothing wrong, but now that he was out, it wasn't healthy. And it wouldn't make things better.

They reached the Hideout a moment later. It was a long, wide ledge that ran from the tallest tower of the Temple to the top of the inner walls. It was mostly hidden from the rest of the Temple, and during sunrise and sunset, it offered a breathtaking view. George had spent many long hours up here, studying or napping or just being alone. But most of the time, he'd been with Clay, or Nick, or both.

It didn't feel right to be back with *Dream*.

"It's still beautiful," George said softly. He settled himself on the ground, dangling his legs over the edge of the ledge. As a kid, he'd never done so for fear of being caught. Now, he didn't really care. Who was going to stop him? The Council?

Dream sat next to him wordlessly. The taller man was painfully quiet, and the distance between them felt impassable. Maybe a simple question could break the ice?

"Why the mask?" George asked. His voice trembled a little, and shame flooded his chest. He couldn't show weakness like that, goddamn it! He had to make his heart hard so he'd be ready for anything Dream threw at him!

...what a horrible way to live.

"It's a long story," Dream murmured. "I mean, I know we have time, but..." The taller man sighed and ran a finger down the front of his mask. "Long, boring story short, I made a mistake. I made a couple of mistakes, actually. And the repercussions... they weren't so great. So I got the mask."

George considered the vague explanation for a couple of seconds. Then, quietly, he said, "You have scars."

"...yeah."

"Do you hate how they look?"

"No. I mean... kind of, I guess. I take this thing off when I'm in my room. Bad and Sap and Ant know what my face looks like. Tubbo, too. Philza might, I don't know. Doesn't really matter."

George thought it a very long-winded answer for a very straightforward question. He remembered Dream as being much more decisive and blunt. As much as the taller man's lack of tact had annoyed him in the past, George preferred it to this insecure version of him.

Silence fell over them again. George didn't know what he was supposed to say. The Dream he was talking to was clearly not the one that had greeted him a couple of days ago, and he didn't know what to do with that. George had been so ready to verbally tear Dream apart. Now, he just felt awkward.

But he had to say something.

"Why did you..." Those weren't the right words. George cleared his throat and tried again. "You're different. Are you okay?" Shit, no, that wasn't it either. "I mean, obviously, you're okay. You're a respected Jedi Master with a padawan. But you're-"

"I'm not being a heartless piece of shit," Dream interrupted, a crooked smile tipping his lips.

George lifted a shoulder. "Yeah."

Dream let out a heavy sigh. "I got into some bad habits when you left," he said slowly, haltingly. If George didn't know better, he would have thought that Dream was choosing every word before he said it. "I was hurt, and I wanted to protect myself, so I wouldn't get hurt again. And I was... convinced to keep those bad habits, so when you showed up, I... reacted. It was stupid of me, and-"

"Convinced?" George repeated incredulously. "I've never heard of anyone convincing you to do anything before."

Dream's head dropped against his knees, which he'd tucked to his chest. For what seemed to be the fourth time in as many minutes, George wished he could see the taller man's face. If not for nostalgia and the strange ache that pulled at George's chest, then to keep Dream accountable. Clearly, the other man had no problem with hiding under emotional fronts. For all George knew, Dream was lying about everything.

"Can you take the mask off?" George asked.

Dream flinched. "No."

It was so clearly an instinctive answer that George didn't even feel offended. "Okay."

"No, wait, I-" Dream let out a frustrated growl and tugged at his hair. "I just... look, I need to make amends with you."

"Isn't that what we're trying to do?" George asked bemusedly.

"No, you don't get it. The Council-"

Any sort of goodwill that George felt towards his former friend evaporated in a heartbeat. Ice cold steel dropped around his heart, and suddenly, it was like the last four years hadn't happened. George felt just as hurt and betrayed and alone as when he'd first been banished.

George stood, backing away from Dream. "The Council told you to talk to me?" he demanded. He yanked his staff from its clip and pointed the end at Dream. He took a sick sense of satisfaction in the panic that contorted Dream's mouth. "Is that all you're doing, *again*? You're still their ambassador? Their little suck-up? Don't you think for one second that I'm-

"George, no, that's not it," Dream interrupted, a desperate edge cutting his voice.

"Don't try to defend them!" George spat. The sound of his name made his heart ache. It sounded so foreign coming from Dream. Gods, why had he let himself come back? He should have known that nothing would change! "I don't care how many years it's been, I won't-

Dream got to his feet as well. "*No*, that's not-

"Stop trying to tell me what's happening!" Anger roared in George's ears, and he extended his staff, planting it in Dream's chest. "I'm not going to-

"If you'd stop for a second-

"-believe that you'd ever-

"-and I'm trying to explain-

"-I thought that you'd-

Dream suddenly surged forward, knocking George's staff out of his hands and grabbing George's shoulders tightly. "*The Council is going to throw you out if I can't make you forgive me!*"

George inhaled sharply. His haze of anger slowly drained away as he tried to process what Dream had said. For his part, the taller man just stood silently, chest heaving. Finally, George managed to find his voice again.

"What?" he whispered.

For a couple of seconds, Dream just fumbled over his words. Then he exhaled sharply. "They've been using me as the model of a perfect Jedi," Dream said, and a harsh edge laced his voice. "Now, they've decided that the mighty Dream should finally find it in himself to stoop to apologies. Or maybe they just want some grand gesture from you... it doesn't matter. They want our amends to be public and perfect, and I'm *really fucking stressed because I was a complete piece of shit to you, and you deserve to hate me forever, and I don't know how one apology could ever make up for that.*"

Dream ran out of air in a gasp, and his shoulders slumped. George just stared at the taller man. His initial perception of Dream had been so incredibly off. George's best friend wasn't gone at all. He was still very much alive, just hidden underneath new layers of anxiety, fear, and what seemed like self-hatred.

"You don't hate me?" George asked softly.

Dream gave a hollow laugh. "I haven't for years," the taller man croaked. "One day, it just kinda hit me. You could die out there, and I'd never know. I'd never get to change how I left things with you. And I just..." Dream's hands began to tremble. "Gods, George, I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry for

everything. I didn't- I-”

Something in George's very soul cracked. Maybe it was the remnants of the grudge he'd carried for so long, finally crumbling to dust. Or maybe it was the last of the walls he'd built around his heart falling away.

Whatever it was, George grabbed the front of Dream's robes and dragged the taller man into a hug. Dream went without complaint, sliding his arms under George's and pulling them together. George buried his face in Dream's shoulder, and suddenly, he felt like he was home. He laughed shakily and clung to Dream's robes, pouring everything that he'd bottled up into their embrace. Dream hugged him back just as tightly.

George felt safe. Truly, truly safe.

“I missed you so fucking much,” Dream whispered. His voice was a soft breath against George's neck. “So, so much.”

His whole body was shaking, but George couldn't have cared less. “I missed you too, Dream,” he whispered back.

Dream laughed quietly. “None of that Dream bullshit,” he said. George could hear the tears in the taller man's voice, even as muffled as it was. “I'm just Clay.”

“Clay,” George murmured. The name rolled off his tongue as if he'd never stopped saying it.

Silence wrapped around them as George melted into their hug. Clay held him like he was afraid George would disappear, and for the first time in four years, George let himself stop thinking. He just existed. The only things he was aware of were the feeling of Clay's arms around him and the warmth that flooded his chest.

*This is what I needed, George thought. I feel like I'm alive again.*

There was a glow in George's heart that hadn't been present since his and Clay's last conversation. Through the cloud of joy that covered his mind, George vaguely recalled a piece of their parting argument.

*“I already know I'm the worst Jedi in history! I tried! I fucking tried, Clay!”*

*“No, you failed! That wasn't trying; that was giving up on everything we're supposed to stand for! If you had 'tried,' you wouldn't be facing murder charges! How have you deluded yourself into thinking that you're innocent?”*

*“What would have you have done?! You still haven't told me what you would have done! Let me guess, I'm the great and powerful Clay, and I don't answer to anyone! Oh, yeah, I also tell my friends that they deserve to die!”*

*“I never fucking said that!”*

*“You just said that I deserve to be banished! What could you possibly mean by that, if not that you want me dead? Just say what you want to say! You always do!”*

*“You know what, you're right! You do deserve to be banished! You killed people, George!”*

*“And what did you do? You sat in here! You followed the masters around and told them that you'd do anything, and then they patted you on the head and said that you're too special! If you'd gotten*

*off your ass, maybe you'd be the one being banished instead of me! You're a coward!"*

*"Go to hell!"*

*"Don't you remember? They're sending me there tomorrow!"*

George closed his eyes and sighed into Clay's shoulder. There was still a lot they had to talk about. There was so much that they'd left unresolved, so much that still divided them. But knowing that Clay didn't hate him anymore was a good enough place to start. And maybe an apology was in order, too.

"I'm sorry for everything I said before I left," George murmured. "You aren't a coward, and you never have been. I couldn't control myself, and I lashed out. I'm so sorry, Clay."

"You don't have to apologize," Clay chuckled. He released George from their hug and pulled back enough that George could clearly see his mask. "Honestly, you were right. Back then, I was so scared of getting killed, even after we'd trained for so long. I went in the total opposite direction after you left. That's how I got..." Clay tapped his mask with a finger.

George let out an incredulous laugh. "You threw yourself into every dangerous situation you could find just because I said you were a coward?"

A small smile quirked Clay's lips. "I mean, yeah. What else was I going to do? I was a grief-stricken 17-year-old."

George shook his head a little. Suddenly, he realized that he and Clay had never really broken their hug. Clay's arms were wrapped protectively around George's waist, and George rested his hands on Clay's arms. Somehow, even after so long, they could still find it in themselves to be close.

"I still wanna see your face," George said absently, touching the edge of Clay's mask. Clay opened his mouth, but George hushed him with a wave of his hand. "But I get it. I've been gone a long time, and I know we're not the friends we used to be. It's okay."

Clay's mouth pulled into a shy smile. "We're definitely gonna be friends again, though."

George smiled back and finally broke their embrace, bending to pick up his staff. It was then that he realized he'd abandoned his book to the hallways of the Temple.

"I lost my book," George groaned as he straightened. "Oh, gods, that's right, I threw it at you. Sorry about that, by the way. If anyone even touches it, I'm going to kill them."

Clay chuckled. "They won't. I'm sure they'll just leave it there, or put it next to a pillar, or something." A soft smile touched the taller man's face. "You still care that much about your books, huh? I thought- I'm glad you're still like that. I was worried... I don't know, I guess I was worried that you'd changed."

George had changed a lot, in ways he probably didn't even realize. But the look on Clay's face made the words die in his throat, and he just shook his head a little. "You're such a sap," George murmured. He didn't really mean it. "I'll worry about the book later. C'mon, let's just sit down and talk. There's so much that I wanna know."

They both sat, resting their backs against the Temple wall. The distance between them now felt crossable, and George decided to test their new boundaries. (In other words, he was deliriously happy from being with Clay again, and he desperately wanted more human contact.) He scooted closer and rested his head on Clay's shoulder. Without even a second of hesitation, the taller man

wrapped an arm around George's shoulders and pulled them against each other. George's heart buzzed with delight.

“There is one serious thing I wanna get out of the way first,” Clay said quietly. “The Council really wants their 'public amends.' I was kinda scared to talk to you, so I ran out their timer, and... basically, we have to 'publicly apologize' today.”

George sighed. “You always procrastinate the important stuff.” Clay spluttered in protest, but George talked over him. “That's fine by me. It's not like I have to fake it or anything. But I'm not going to hug you in front of everyone, okay?”

Clay cracked a slight smile. “I'll remember that.”

“Now, come on.” George poked the taller man in the ribs, and Clay made a squeaky noise that twisted George's stomach into happy knots. “When did you get Tubbo as a padawan? That must have been a *huge* change.”

Clay chuckled. “It was. I think I spent a week in Bad's room just panicking. Literally everyone was like, 'oh, yeah, you're a powerful Jedi, so you're gonna train this kid!’” Clay's wide grin turned fond. “But it wasn't as bad as I thought it'd be. Tubbo's a great kid, and he's gonna be one of the best Jedi ever. He has power, talent, morals - everything.”

George thought of the energetic padawan and smiled. “He knows, you know.”

“Knows what?”

“That you and I have history.”

“I'd be disappointed if he didn't. I never told him anything, so I guess that was another defense mechanism that I never addressed. I'll talk to him tomorrow or something.”

They lapsed into a comfortable silence, and George gazed out over the Temple grounds. So much had changed. On the day of his exile, George had promised himself that he'd never come back to the Temple. Now, it was proving to be the best decision of his life.

“What about you?” Clay suddenly nudged George's arm. “You were an Underworld engineer! You've got to have some good stories.”

George smirked at the taller man. “Oh, you can't even imagine what I've been through. I was a badass down there.”

Clay burst out laughing, and the sound made George's heart soar. Gods, he'd missed that.

“Try me,” Clay said, still chuckling.

“Alright, jackass, I know you don't believe me. Let's start with my staff. You wanna know how I got it?”

“I am all yours.”

It was a throwaway line, something that Clay had said since they were kids. But now, those four little words made George feel like he was glowing.

He and Clay were friends again.

## Chapter End Notes

I won't lie, I almost made myself cry while I was writing this one... I hope y'all liked it, too! Please drop a comment if you are so inclined, and, as always, thank you so much for all your support! I'll see y'all this weekend!



## Remember to Breathe, Part 3

### Chapter Notes

Another one-POV chapter, my friends, and this one is just as important as the last. "Dream getting a character development arc because he has a lot of unresolved issues and he has to work through them in order to grow?" no one asks. "Yes," I say, already writing an 8k update about the beginning of that journey.

Fair warning, there are some darker themes scattered amongst my usual humor. However, there is no explicit violence!

With that out of the way, I hope you enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Clay huffed a sigh as he strode down the hallway. Gods, where was Tubbo? His padawan was usually never late for curfew, and when he hadn't shown up at Clay's door at 7 o'clock on the dot, Clay's anxiety had gone through the roof. Now, here he was, walking around the Temple in search of his padawan.

*I don't have time for this*, Clay thought, nerves and frustration mixing into an agitated blend that sloshed around his head. *I need to get back to George.*

He and George had spent most of the afternoon at the Hideout, trading stories and talking about absolutely anything. Clay had learned all about George's life in the Underworld, and in turn, he'd shared his missions to other planets (as well as becoming a Master and training Tubbo). They hadn't talked about anything serious yet, but Clay was perfectly fine with that. Building a foundation of new memories felt like a better way to start off their rekindled friendship than discussing old hurts.

Once they'd finally finished talking, they'd agreed to go to the Council and present their "public amends." Clay refused to let George get kicked out of the Temple again. If he was, Clay would probably just leave with him.

But now, Tubbo was nowhere to found, and Clay's patience was wearing thin. He *needed* to get back to George!

"Where are you, Tubbo?" Clay growled aloud. He reached out with the Force and scanned his immediate surroundings. He'd been doing the exact same thing for the past fifteen minutes to no avail, but finally, Clay was gratified by a familiar signature. Tubbo was coming up behind him, moving abnormally fast. Clay turned with a relieved sigh. "Oh, there you are. Tubbo, I—"

Tubbo barreled into Clay's arms, and Clay caught his padawan, startled. That wasn't how their greetings usually went.

*"There's something out there!"* Tubbo said, his words tumbling together in a rush. His voice came out in sharp gasps, and Clay struggled to put the pieces together. *"I was in the library with Tommy, and we found out this really important information about the attacks! He went to go tell Master Wilbur, so I tried to find you, but then I saw these things in the sky, and I had to tell someone, and—"*

“Tubbo!” Clay interrupted. He gripped his padawan's shoulders with firm but gentle hands. “Tubbo, less words. Try again.”

Tubbo took a trembling breath, then blurted, “A lot of somethings are coming towards the Temple! I don't know what they are, but Master Bad is out there, and I think he needs our help!”

Fear slashed at Clay's heart. Gods, he'd known that it would come eventually. Such a peaceful week had left no doubt that another attack would soon follow. But Tubbo was clearly on the verge of panicking, so Clay squeezed his padawan's shoulders and gave him a small smile.

“Alright, Tubbo, listen,” he said softly. “It's gonna be okay. I'm going to help Bad, so I want you to go back to your quarters and-”

The Temple suddenly rumbled beneath Clay's feet, and a low roar filled the air. Clay's heart stuttered in his chest.

“What was that?” Tubbo asked. His voice was small, and he shuffled a step closer to Clay.

“I don't know,” Clay murmured. “I-”

A black shimmer suddenly whipped past them with a near-supersonic *boom*, and a second later, a purple explosion billowed from below them. The entire Temple shuddered, and Clay was tossed off balance. Acting more on instinct than any sort of organized thought process, Clay grabbed Tubbo's robes and held the brown-haired boy close. When the Temple finally stopped shaking, Clay looked around.

“Dream, what was that?” Tubbo croaked. His eyes were wide with fear, and he clung to Clay's arm in an uncharacteristic show of physical affection.

“I don't know,” Clay said again, more sharply this time. “Get back to your quarters and barricade the door behind you. Go!” He shoved Tubbo down the hallway, but his padawan dug in his heels.

“I'm not leaving you!” Tubbo drew his lightsaber, and the green blade hummed to life. “I want to help! Even if you don't let me fight, at least let me take you to Master Bad!”

The tirade that Clay had been building in his mind died. He would be able to get to Bad more quickly with Tubbo's help... but was it worth it to risk Tubbo's? “Alright, come on,” Clay snapped. He grabbed his padawan's wrist and rushed down the hallway. “Stay close to me.” Clay drew his own lightsaber, and Master and Padawan's lightsabers glowed in duel green harmony.

Explosions rocked the air in deafening waves. Clay gritted his teeth against each blast, but his heart twisted every time he heard Tubbo cry out in pain. This was no place for his padawan. Gods, he should have just sent Tubbo to safety. Clay couldn't protect the boy while he tried to help Bad defend against... whatever this latest monstrosity was.

The two of them swung around a corner and started down a flight of steps. But before they could reach the bottom, a low hum filled the air. Clay looked around wildly, and after a moment, he picked out the descending form of a sleek black drone.

“Get back!” Clay shouted. He enfolded Tubbo in his arms and dragged his padawan backward.

Not a second later, an explosion rocked the ground. A couple of steps burst into purple flames, and they dissolved into nothing before Clay could do so much as blink. Then the heatwave swept over them. Clay hissed and continued to drag Tubbo up the steps.

"I know about those!" Tubbo shouted once they reached a safe distance. "They're potassian bombs! Super corrosive and very, very dangerous!"

Clay surveyed the now-destroyed courtyard with a growing pit in his stomach. "How hard are they to come by?" he asked.

"Very! They're only available on the black market, and they were patented by this guy named Illumina!"

Clay froze. Illumina? Philza had introduced him to an Illumina years ago, back when he had still been a padawan. He had fond memories of the easy-going man that had taught him how to punch and kick. Was it possible that the Illumina Clay had known had also made these bombs? And how on earth did Tubbo even know what they were?

Another explosion rattled the Temple, and Clay shook himself out of his head.

"Where's Bad?" he asked Tubbo.

Tubbo's lightsaber wove back and forth in the air due to its owner's shaking hands. "He's by the entrance! Last time I saw him, anyway..."

Clay peered over the Temple grounds, searching for the statues that marked the entrance to the Jedi Temple. He quickly found them nearby, but purple fire already roared around the bases of the monoliths. Clay's stomach clenched.

"Come on, Tubbo!"

Clay launched himself over the roaring fire at the bottom of the steps and raced towards the Temple entrance. As he ran, Clay narrowed his focus to two things: Tubbo's signature, to make sure his padawan was always behind him, and Bad's distant signature. Even as far away as he was, Clay could feel Bad's fear and anguish. He pushed his legs harder, using the Force to urge his body faster.

*Hang on, Bad! Clay thought desperately. I'm coming!*

Suddenly, Clay was hit with an overwhelming feeling of déjà vu. This is what had happened that night. It had been just as dark, and the situation had been just as dire. But Clay was reaching a point that he never had that night. That night, he'd been recalled into the Temple and told to sit tight. That night, George had been forced to make an impossible decision while Clay relished in the fact that he would survive no matter what.

Now Clay was on the ground, finally doing something to protect the Temple. How would he hold up if he was faced with the same choice George had been?

Clay shook himself. That didn't matter. He just had to get to Bad – everything else came second.

As Clay and Tubbo scrambled through one of the last courtyards, another presence bolted out of the shadows. As soon as Clay noticed the mop of black hair, he heaved a sigh of relief. Two Jedi were always better than one.

"What's going on?" Sapnap demanded.

"No idea," Clay muttered back. Energy pushed at the edges of his mind, growing stronger with every step he took towards Bad. "Keep an eye on Tubbo for me. I won't be able to watch him the whole time."

Sapnap glanced at the pale padawan, then nodded slightly. "Nothing'll happen to him."

*I hope so*, Clay thought nervously. He'd always been protective of his padawan, but when it came down to it, Tubbo trailed him into every dangerous situation they were faced with. Gods, what would Clay do if Tubbo got hurt? After this night, Clay might have to be more selective with the missions Tubbo accompanied him on.

After all... Clay didn't want to be the same as his master.

Then the three of them burst into the courtyard behind the statues, and Clay ran out of time to think. Everything was engulfed in flame. Trees roared with purple fire, fountains were cracked and broken, spurting water everywhere, and the gigantic statues at the end of the courtyard were beginning to crack under the heat of the fire. In the middle of it all, Bad gazed up at the night sky.

"Bad!" Clay shouted. "Get to cover!"

"No!" The daemon Jedi threw a hand at Clay as if telling him to stay. "There has to be a pattern! Every twenty seconds, one of these things fly by, and the next bomb drops! If I can just--"

Somewhere else in the Temple, another bomb exploded, and Clay was tossed to the side. Sapnap stumbled into him, and Clay quickly caught the younger man before he fell into a burning tree. Sapnap shot Clay a grateful glance as he steadied himself.

"Bad, you have to get to cover!" Clay shouted again. "You're going to get hit!"

Bad waved his hand again, and Clay tore his attention away from the daemon Jedi. If Bad wouldn't listen to him, then he had other things to worry about. Where was Tubbo? Sapnap could take care of himself, as could Bad. But Tubbo wasn't as strong as they were. If he was caught off guard-

There! He was on the other side of the courtyard, edging towards Bad. The brown-haired boy's lightsaber illuminated his face with a deathly green glow, and suddenly, dread punched a hole through Clay's stomach. Something terrible was about to happen. Clay shoved his lightsaber into his belt and sprinted for his padawan. As soon as he did, engine roar filled the air.

"Move, Tubbo!" Clay shouted.

Tubbo looked up dazedly, but it was already too late. Clay could hear the hum of the descending bomb, and there was no time to get Tubbo to safety gently. *Gods, I'm so sorry*, Clay thought. He tackled Tubbo to the ground, using himself as a body shield to cover as much of his padawan as he could.

For a terrible eternity, nothing happened. Then a wave of burning heat hit Clay like a punch, and he was thrown off his padawan, his ears filled with an ear-splitting *Boom!* Sky and earth blurred into one, then crashed back into place as Clay's back collided with something hard. His left shoulder gave a sickly pop, and all the air left his lungs in a *whoosh*.

Clay's vision dulled to black. For a moment, he could only lay still, gasping for breath and trying to claw his way back to awareness. Clay tried to hold onto his thoughts, but they slipped out of his hands like fish in a river.

*Tubbo*, Clay thought desperately. *Tubbo needs me. Sapnap? Bad. Bad is in danger, too. Why is he in danger? Where's George? He's... I don't know where he is. Gods, is he okay? Where am I?*

A hand landed on Clay's injured left shoulder, and he gasped in pain.

“Okay, that's a problem,” a voice muttered. Clay could barely pick out the words, and the voice's identity was lost to the ether of his fuzzy brain. “Let's do this... and this.”

Two things happened at once. First, someone shoved something very sharp into Clay's side, and electricity crackled along his body. Second, someone wrenched his left shoulder back into its socket. But, due to the energy that assaulted Clay's nervous system, he barely even noticed the pain from his shoulder's relocation.

Basically, Clay was lying on the ground, barely conscious, and then was shocked back to life.

“Oh, fuck!” Clay bit out. He pushed himself onto all fours with newly revitalized muscles and shook his head viciously, trying to clear the fuzzy feeling from his head. “Sap, I fucking hate you. What was that?”

“I'm not Nick, but fair enough. Not the first time I've heard that you hate me.”

The clipped tones mixed with that beautifully familiar accent made Clay feel woozy all over again. He looked up sharply and found George standing beside him, fiddling with a knob on his staff.

“George?” Clay demanded. He was equal parts confused and enthralled.

“You'll be fine,” George said briskly, not even looking up from his staff. “It was just a dislocated shoulder. Nick is safe over there, and Tubbo is waiting for you behind us. I'm going to try to get Bad out of there.” Clay could only stare, dumbfounded, and after a moment, George met his gaze. The shorter man rolled his eyes. “Honestly, I don't know how you think I survived without getting a little creative. Now move!”

At the commanding edge in George's voice, Clay scrambled to his feet and raced for the mop of brown hair that poked out from a clump of nearby bushes. Clay slid into the shrubbery and skidded to a stop next to Tubbo.

“Stay down,” Clay ordered.

Tubbo nodded once, then looked back at George with wide eyes. The shorter man was swiftly moving towards Bad, dodging each flare of fire that threatened to consume him. “Is that-?” Tubbo started to ask.

“That's George,” Clay finished.

Tubbo shot Clay a wildly confused look. “You- you just said his name.”

Clay smiled wanly as he watched George step around a pocket of a purple flame with an unreasonable amount of grace. “Of course I said his name, Tubbo. Why wouldn't I?” A prick of guilt touched Clay's heart at Tubbo's spluttering. He'd tell his padawan everything later. This wasn't exactly an appropriate situation to have a conversation about old mistakes.

A blur in the sky suddenly appeared in Clay's peripheral vision, and he looked around. More drones were heading towards them. But instead of being near invisible against the night sky, their noses burned with purple energy.

Clay's blood ran cold. “George!” he bellowed. When the shorter man continued towards Bad like he hadn't heard a thing, Clay burst from the shrubbery. He locked onto George's faint Force signature, then pulled with all the power he could muster. George was yanked across the courtyard like a puppet on a string, right into Clay's grasp. For a split second, they stood nose to nose, and Clay's breath caught in his throat.

No time for that. There would never be a time for that.

“Clay! What the hell are you doing?” George barked as Clay dragged him under the small overhang that protected Tubbo's clump of bushes. “I was so close to-”

The rest of George's sentence was drowned out by a sudden torrent of laser fire. It pummeled the spot where George had been standing, and shards of cobblestone flew everywhere. Clay glanced at George. The shorter man swallowed slightly.

“Okay. Maybe that was a good idea.”

“Where did you come from?” Clay asked, scanning the sky for more laser drones.

“The Council room, er, whatever it's called now. I heard the explosions, and I came to help.”

Clay snorted and gave George an unimpressed look (though he later realized that George hadn't been able to see his face due to his mask). “You came to help?”

“To be fair, Master, he did fix your shoulder,” Tubbo piped up. “And he did almost make it to Master Bad.” Clay glared at his padawan, as he knew Tubbo could read his expressions through his mask, but the brown-haired boy just shrugged a little. “I wouldn't have been able to help you.”

George grinned at the padawan. “It's good to see you again, Tubbo.”

Tubbo beamed back. “You too, George.”

Clay rolled his eyes with a quiet sigh. George had told Clay of his new friendship with the padawan, but Clay hadn't realized that they were already so close. Gods, this had to be against the laws of the universe, didn't it? His wickedly intelligent padawan and his brilliant best friend, working together?

Another round of laser fire shattered their quiet moment. Clay pressed himself further into the bushes, but he glared up into the sky. If only Clay could see the drones more clearly! Then he could drive his lightsaber through a few of them and make things a little safer!

Suddenly, the roar of engines filled the air. Before Clay could even turn to Tubbo, George grabbed both of them and dashed to their right.

“Come on!” the shorter man barked.

The three of them just managed to make it out from under the overhang before it blew into pieces. Clay was sent sprawling to the ground once again, but this time, his body remained intact.

“Thanks,” Clay gasped. He helped Tubbo to his feet, then turned to George and held out a hand. “How'd you do that?”

“I-I felt it coming,” George stammered as he hauled himself to his feet. He seemed suddenly nervous, and Clay squeezed their interlocked hands with no small amount of concern. “I don't know. It was such a huge cluster of energy, and it was coming right for us... you really didn't feel anything?”

Clay shook his head.

“That sounds like what Tommy can do,” Tubbo said quietly, and he gave Clay a curious look. “Maybe they're both really, really Force-sensitive.”

It was a strange thought, but it was entirely possible. After all, it was the shorter man's raw power that had gotten him exiled in the first place, and he hadn't been back to the Temple in years. His powers could have blossomed without him even knowing. But those were questions for another time. There were still bombs dropping on their heads and purple fire that had begun to consume the courtyard.

“Where's Sapnap?” Clay said, scanning the hellish landscape. “We need to make sure he's safe, too.”

As soon as he said it, Clay's eyes landed on a still figure across from him. They were crumpled on the ground, just barely protected from the flames by a low wall. Clay's stomach dropped.

“Sapnap!” he tried to shout.

But he never heard himself say it. More drones roared by, and this time, for a split second, Clay felt a massive amount of energy hurtle towards him. Then a bomb exploded directly at their feet, and Clay was blasted into the air. He was vaguely aware of a dark sky, then ground, then fire. Then his head hit something hard, and Clay's vision went dark.

For a moment, the searing pain in his skull was too much to handle. Slowly, it faded just enough for Clay to take a gasping breath and drag himself back to consciousness. He tried to push himself to his hands and knees, but his body wouldn't respond. As he blinked himself back to awareness, Clay realized that he couldn't hear anything, either – not his wheezing breaths or the fire crackling around him.

Clay craned his neck, and to his relief, his traitorous muscles allowed him just enough strength so he could see the rest of the courtyard. There was even more fire now. Sapnap had disappeared from view, but in the middle of it all, Bad still stood tall.

“Run,” Clay croaked. It took all his strength to speak, and he had to cough a couple of times before trying again. “You're going to get yourself killed.”

A rumble spread through the courtyard. Clay felt in his very bones, and numb horror spread through his already broken body. *Please, Bad, move!* he thought desperately.

Then Bad was engulfed in a purple inferno.

Clay wanted to run to Bad's side and drag the daemon out of the fire. He wanted to get up and drive his lightsaber through every single drone that flew over their heads. He wanted to do anything that wasn't *watching one of his closest friends die before his eyes*. But he couldn't. Clay could only watch as Bad collapsed to the floor, smoking.

“Bad,” Clay sobbed. He couldn't even hear himself, but he still choked out the words. “Bad, I'm so sorry. I'm so, so sorry...”

That was it, then. Bad was the first causality in this gods-forsaken war. Bad, the only Jedi in the entire Temple who'd never wanted to kill their secret enemies. Bad, who cared about every living thing to an unreasonable degree. Sweet, loving Bad.

Clay closed his eyes. His despair and anguish and hatred was shutting down his body, poisoning it from the inside. Clay knew that there was still more to be done, but he couldn't find the strength to get back up. He'd lost Bad. Why should Clay bother getting back up? What was left? Bad had gotten him through some of the worst times of his life.

Without Bad... what was Clay supposed to do?

Darkness crept into Clay's mind. Maybe the fire would consume him before some other Jedi could stumble across him and save him. It would be fine... wouldn't it?

Then Clay's hearing returned in a rush. Everything sounded sharp and clear, and beyond the crackle of fire, a cutting voice filled the air.

*“Ζητώ από το θεϊκό μου δικαίωμα γέννησης.”*

Life suddenly surged through Clay's body, chasing away the darkness that had claimed his mind. Clay took a rattling breath and stumbled to his feet, shaking his head wildly. Gods, what had just happened to him? It had felt like... like he was being swallowed by his own emotions.

*“Αναδείξτε τη δύναμη των αρχαίων.”*

Another blast of power flew through Clay's body, and his left wrist ignited with the heat of a mini sun. Clay hissed at the white-hot pain and hurriedly unwrapped the bandages around his wrist. The last bandage fell away to reveal the protection runes that Bad had tattooed onto his skin years ago. The runes, which usually glowed a soft amber, now flickered deep red.

Hoping against all hope, Clay looked to the center of the courtyard.

Bad stood tall amidst a ring of purple fire. For a moment, Clay felt delirious with relief. But then, he noticed the dark red runes that burned in the air around Bad's shoulders. Aside from that, the daemon's eyes were solid red - the same dark red as the runes.

“Bad?” Clay murmured aloud.

The daemon was suddenly surrounded by a haze of dark red energy, and his feet lifted off the ground. Magic poured from Bad's fingertips, and within a few seconds, three intricate runes had traced themselves into the air at Bad's back.

*“Ευλόγησέ με με τη δύναμή τους και δώστε μου την ικανότητά τους, και θα καταστρέψω τους εχθρούς μου.”* Bad's voice was layered with undeniable power, and each word sent raw energy roaring through Clay's body, driving him to his knees. *“Δώσε μου τη δύναμή τους!”*

A rune carved itself into the ground beneath Bad's feet, and the daemon exploded with magic.

Every nerve in Clay's body was suddenly set on fire. For a moment, he knew nothing but raw power and a terrible pounding in his head. Then it cleared, and Clay was left feeling like he was invincible. He drew his lightsaber and gasped as the blade reacted to his touch, humming with more power than he'd ever felt before. On a hunch, Clay glanced at his wrist. The runes on his wrist now glowed solid red.

“Master?”

With a flash of guilt, Clay realized that he hadn't checked on his padawan and George. (And, with more guilt, he remembered that he'd completely forgotten about them after Bad had “died.” But that was something to think about at a later date.) Clay turned, already opening his mouth to tell Tubbo that it was okay. Then his eyes landed on George, and Clay's mind went blank.

George was engulfed by the same red haze that Bad was. The shorter man stared down at his hands with an awestruck expression, and he clearly felt the same power that Clay himself felt.

It was like Clay was looking at a part of George he'd never seen before. He'd always known that George was powerful; he'd known that since they were kids. But George's haze of power glowed



brighter than Bad's did. His whole body rippled with pure energy, like something in his very soul was responding to Bad's magic.

Was this what the masters had always talked about? George's "abnormally strong connection to the Force?"

"George," Clay said dumbly. "You're glowing."

George glanced at him, and Clay flinched. George's eyes were dark red. Clay had never realized how much he loved the shorter man's chocolate eyes until now.

"So are you!" George said, blissfully unaware of his solid red eyes.

Clay glanced down at his arms and found that George was right; he burned with the same aura of raw power that George and Bad did. (But, as he noticed, he wasn't nearly as bright as George.)

"Dream! George!"

Clay whipped around, and his heart flew with joy. On the other side of the courtyard, Sapnap was on his feet, partially hidden by a haze of red power.

"What do you say we take out some fucking drones?" Sapnap crowed. The younger men drew his lightsaber, and with a guttural roar, he launched himself into the air. Clay watched, astonished, as Sapnap landed on a drone and began tearing it apart with his lightsaber.

Clay turned back to George and Tubbo. George was busy inspecting something on his wrist, but Tubbo had backed away against a wall, eyes wide with fear. Clay took a couple of careful steps towards his padawan, and he nearly sobbed with relief when Tubbo hurried up to him.

"Master, are you alright?" Tubbo asked quietly. He made a faint gesture towards the runes glowing along Clay's left wrist. "That looks really painful. Are you in pain?"

"No, Tubbo, I'm fine," Clay chuckled. He placed his hands on Tubbo's shoulders and gave his padawan a gentle smile. His heart swelled as Tubbo didn't even try to pull away. Gods, his padawan really did trust him. "Listen, I need you to get out of here. I can't keep track of all the drones, and I don't want you to get hurt. You know this Temple like no one else, so disappear for a bit. Once the coast is clear, you can come out and find me, okay?"

Tubbo nodded once. "Okay." For a brief moment, a smile flitted across his face. "I'll be watching, Master. You've always been good at putting on a show."

Then Tubbo took off, racing away from the courtyard faster than a wild rabbit. Within a few seconds, he was gone. Clay took a deep breath, promised himself that his padawan would be okay, then turned back to the courtyard. Time to see what Bad's magic could really do.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa, what do you think you're doing?"

A hand suddenly landed on Clay's exposed left wrist, and he flinched, pulling it away involuntary. It took him a couple of seconds to realize that it was just George - George, who was now wearing a perplexed expression. There was something else Clay would have to explain later.

"We can't just go running out there!" George protested. Thankfully, he was leaving the subject alone for the moment. "We're going to be killed!"

Clay flexed his fingers and felt the new power inside of him roar in response. He gave George a

crooked smile. "Nah, I think we'll be fine. Come on."

George spluttered indignantly, but Clay ignored him and stepped out into the courtyard. A drone whipped by overhead, and Clay jumped, his super-powered legs carried him into the air as if it was nothing. Clay laughed, high on adrenaline, and ran his lightsaber down the drone's hull. It sparked twice, then exploded. Clay landed as gracefully as a cat.

"Nice magic, Bad," Clay muttered appreciatively. He glanced over at the daemon, who was still encased in a magical haze. As soon as this was over, Clay would have to give Bad a hug and take him out to lunch for all the work he'd put into finessing his power.

For the next five minutes, Clay pushed his new gifts to the max. He threw himself at every drone that came within range and tore them apart with a single stroke of his lightsaber. With him and Sapnap flying through the sky, wreckage quickly built up. After an exceptionally smooth slice, Clay finally paused to survey the damage. Other Jedi had arrived to put out the fires, and aside from the wreckage of all the destroyed drones, the courtyard was mostly intact. And, thank the gods, no one had been killed.

Sapnap suddenly landed next to Clay and gave him a wild grin. "We gotta tell Bad to do this more often," the shorter man said, and the haze of energy around him pulsed with his enthusiasm.

Clay glanced at his daemon friend once again. Bad still floated over the center of the courtyard, but his arms were trembling, and Clay had noticed that his extra strength was starting to wear off. "This is probably really draining for him," he said, despite the power that sang in his veins. "We have to take out all the drones before Bad's magic wears off. We can't fight these things without him."

Engine roar filled the air, and Clay switched back to combat mode. Not a second later, three drones whipped across the sky, clearly circling back to drop their payloads. Clay carefully gauged the distance, then launched himself into the air. Clay landed flat on the leading drone's hull and drove his lightsaber through the metal plating. Behind him, he heard the crunch of metal, and Clay let out a sigh of relief. Good, Sapnap had taken care of the other two drones. There couldn't be that many left.

The drone exploded, and Clay landed at the edge of the courtyard. Sapnap dropped to his side a second later.

"And we're safe once again," Sapnap snickered. "Lame. I can't believe this is all the 'rebels' sent at us. Nice double kill, by the way."

Clay froze. "What?"

"Nice double kill. Come on, dude, the *one* time I try to compliment you--"

"I thought you got the double kill."

"No. That was you."

For a horrible second, Clay and Sapnap just stared at each other. Then cold realization hit Clay like an anvil, and he turned to protect Bad. Too late. The third drone dropped its bomb, and Clay could only watch in horror as it hit Bad square in the chest and exploded.

Cacophonous ringing filled Clay's head, twisting knives into every part of his brain. He tried to shout, but nothing came out. Could he just not hear himself? Clay had no idea. All he knew was the ringing in his head. It drowned out everything else and drove needles into his very bones. He was

being ripped apart at the seams.

Then, as quickly as it had come, it was gone. Clay took several seconds just to enjoy the blissful silence, and he almost smiled. Such small things in life could bring so much joy.

*What the fuck?* was Clay's very next thought. *I'm not happy right now; I'm in the middle of a fight! Bad might actually be dead!*

It was then that Clay realized his eyes were already open, and he was lying face-down on the cobblestone. Bad's magic had abandoned his body, and he felt so, so weak. But anger quickly took the place of the magic, and Clay shoved himself onto his elbows. *Not again*, Clay growled to himself. *I'm not letting this happen to me again! I won't be useless!*

Sapnap laid to Clay's immediate right, still groaning as his body recovered from having its newfound magic forcibly ripped away. Bad was crumpled in the middle of the courtyard. His runes were gone, and his body was visibly smoking, but Clay could see the daemon's chest rising and falling.

"Bad," Clay rasped. He forced himself to his feet, one painful jerk of movement at a time. "Bad! I'm coming!"

Engine roar filled the air, and Clay's heart twisted into a knot. *No, not now! I need to get Bad out of there! He almost died in front of me before, and I can't let that happen again!*

Fate wasn't a kind thing. Clay could only hobble towards his downed friend, and at the rate he was moving, he'd never get there in time. For the first time in his life, Clay truly understood what it was like to be completely helpless. His body was near broken, no one was coming to help him, and one of his dearest friends lay dying just beyond his fingertips.

*How do I save everyone?*

And then, a miracle arrived.

George suddenly emerged from behind the wreckage of a downed drone. Clay had been vaguely aware of the shorter man making sure that the drones were well and truly destroyed, but he'd mostly lost track of him. Now, George stood tall, towering over Bad like a human shield.

"George!" Clay shouted desperately. His voice was weak against the roar of the coming drones, but he had to say something! He couldn't let George die, too!

But George didn't move. He just glared up at the drones, and suddenly, Clay saw the ferocity in the shorter man's gaze. George gripped his staff with white knuckles and protected all of Bad's shaking frame with his own.

And then George screamed. He threw his staff to the side and raised his hands towards the oncoming fleet of drones. Yellow lightning exploded out of his hands in glittering arcs. The twin forks of electricity latched onto the first of the drones, then jumped to the rest in a terrifying procession, coloring the sky with golden light. George closed his fists, and each drone exploded in a magnificent blast.

Clay's brain completely shorted out. For a long moment, he just stared, trying to comprehend what he had seen. Even as rubble showered down on his head, Clay couldn't find the will to move.

His first conscious thought was, *How did George grow up to be even more goddamn attractive?*

His second was to slap himself and try to get his brain back on track.

Had George just used Force lightning? That had always been a Dark side skill, and George definitely wasn't a Sith. He wasn't even on any side of the Force! But there was no doubt that he had manifested the Force in the form of lightning. However, it had been yellow instead of the blue that was indicative of Force lightning. Did that mean it was different?

George started to keel over, and Clay decided to ponder the semantics of yellow and blue lightning at a later date.

"George," Clay said softly, hobbling as fast as he could. He made it just in time to steady George on his feet and carefully move them away from Bad. The last thing he needed was to accidentally step on the exhausted daemon. "Gods, that was incredible. Are you okay?"

George blinked drowsily. He clearly wasn't functioning at full capacity. "I think so," he slurred. "Are they all gone?"

Clay scanned the sky and, upon finding nothing there, smiled. "They're gone. You just used lightning, George. You got rid of all of them."

"Me?" George's face contorted into a slight frown. "No, I can't do that. You and Nick... you guys use the Force. I was just running around when Bad did his magic thing. I didn't use lightning. I..." George's frown deepened. "I did use lightning. That... that was me. Does that mean I'm evil?"

"No, no, no," Clay said hurriedly. He clutched George's arms tightly, and the shorter man leaned into the slight touch. "You're not evil. That was amazing. You're... you're special, George. You've always been special. Do you remember that?"

George blinked again, and Clay realized that the shorter man was still too drowsy to really understand him. Clay sighed a little and gently released George's arms. "Sit down right here, alright? I'm going to help Sapnap and Bad."

"I can help Bad," George said, and his gaze sharpened. "Go take care of Nick. Make sure he's okay."

Clay nodded once, turning and heading for said friend, who was unsteadily getting to his feet. They traded affirmations that they were okay, then Clay helped Sapnap hobble towards George and Bad.

All Clay could think about was George, with lightning arcing from his hands.

Ten minutes later, the whole Temple had shown up at the courtyard. Scouts had confirmed that all the drones were destroyed, and no one had been killed, despite all the wreckage. To Clay's relief, no one put the burden of explaining the situation onto his shoulders. Instead, it fell onto the Jedi who had been putting out fires and Wilbur and Tommy, who had witnessed the whole thing.

*("Why didn't you help us?" Clay demanded, annoyed.*

*Wilbur gave Clay an incredulous look. "Bad started doing some deep magic, then you three started glowing, then you all got superpowers! I'm not going to run into a situation like that, especially when Tommy's with me!")*

Perhaps most importantly, Bad had immediately been carted off to the infirmary. His injuries were severe, but medics assured Clay that the daemon would make a full recovery. That alone was enough to take the weight of the world off Clay's shoulders.

Tubbo crept back into the courtyard after fifteen minutes, tugging at Clay's robes to signal his arrival.

"How was the show?" Clay asked quietly.

Tubbo gave Clay a disconcerted look. "I can't even call that a show, Master. That was just a really long disaster that somehow didn't end with everyone dying."

Clay cracked a grin. "So, it was a good show."

"...yeah, it was really cool. But still really terrifying."

Clay ruffled his padawan's hair and continued listening to Sapnap argue with the medics about the best way to treat his many injuries.

After a solid half an hour, the Council showed up. Clay had expected one or two of them to make an appearance, but to his great surprise, all eleven of them descended into the courtyard. (Not for the first time, Clay wished that Philza was back from the Underworld.)

Clay, Sapnap, and George all stood to the side of the courtyard, trying to keep away from the rest of the action. After vetting their various injuries (to be treated at a later date), the medic had allowed them to stick together. Clay was grateful for that. Both George and Sapnap seemed to be back to normal, but both still seemed a little unsteady on their feet (especially since they were using each other to stay upright).

"Oh look, the assholes have come to play," Sapnap muttered.

"There's only eleven of them," George noted absently. "Who's missing? Is it Philza? Oh, thank the gods, the Council needs him. Oh, Cho-Nal is still here, that's... great. Wait, who's that? The guy with the white eyes."

"Eret," Clay muttered. "I think he's on our side."

"Knights."

Clay quickly straightened as the Council stopped in front of them. Both George and Sapnap shied behind him, and Clay subtly stepped in front of his friends. He was by far in the best shape, and he'd be damned if George and Sapnap had to fend off the Council after everything else they'd been through.

"Knight, Master, and engineer," Master Cho-Nal said, correcting himself with a disdainful smile. "I'm glad to see that the threat to the Temple is eliminated."

"We took care of it, Master," Clay said evenly. "What are you doing here?"

Cho-Nal glanced at Eret, who scowled, but moved to stand in front of Clay. Clearly, Cho-Nal had decided to use the only other person that Clay didn't hate to be the Council's spokesperson.

"Long story made very short, the Council is impressed," Eret said. His mouth quirked in a conspiratorial smile. "You're completely pardoned of any wrongs due to your saving the Temple from a massive attack. Sapnap, you're free to go back to sleep."

Sapnap gave the Council a mock bow and started to walk away, but he paused after a couple of steps. He turned and shot Clay a worried look.

*Are you and George gonna be okay against the vultures?*

*Yeah, we'll be fine. Get some sleep.*

*Okay. Tell me what happens.*

Sapnap disappeared into the Temple without another glance back. Clay and George were truly alone with the Council, and protectiveness flared in Clay's chest. Even Eret wouldn't stop him from defending George with tooth and nail.

"And what about us?" George asked quietly. "Ni- Master Sapnap is free of charges. What do you have in store for us?"

Eret's smile dimmed. He glared over his shoulder at the rest of the Council, and at a grumble from Cho-Nal, they all shuffled a few steps away. "You're technically free of charges, too," Eret said quietly. "But the Council wants both of you in the High Chambers tomorrow morning so you can 'debrief us.' Basically, they think everyone is lying about what happened here. But you're not in danger, I promise. You're stuck here, George."

Clay cracked a small smile. "Have you ever noticed that you and Philza don't talk like the rest of the Council?"

"I don't think we consider ourselves a part of the Council, if I'm honest with you." Eret smiled slightly. "But that's not really important right now. Big moment of truth - are you two friends again?"

Clay hesitated. He knew that he and George weren't "friends." There were still too many cracks that needed to be patched, too many chasms that hadn't been crossed. But were they strong enough to work through those challenges?

Suddenly, a thought pricked at the edge of Clay's mental shields. He hesitantly lowered them and found one of George's thoughts waiting for him.

*I would hug him just to spite the Council, but I already told him no hugs.*

That settled it. Clay wrapped his arm around George's shoulders and dragged the shorter man against his side, completely ignoring George's loud protests. He gave Eret a small smile. "We're working on it. Is that good enough?"

Eret looked between the two of them for a moment. Then a crooked grin spread over his face. "I think that's all the Council can ask for," he chuckled. "Consider Cho-Nal's deal fulfilled, Dream. You're in the clear. I'll message you the time of the meeting later tonight. George, the Jedi Order is happy to provide you protection. Have a good evening, gents."

With that, Eret strode away. He said something to the Council, and all eleven of them swept back towards the Temple.

"What the hell was that, Clay?" George muttered, as soon as the Council was out of earshot. "I told you, no hugs."

Clay squeezed George's shoulder. "That's not what you were thinking. I think that gives me the right to do it."

George's eyes widened to comical size, and for the first time since he'd arrived at the Temple, a deep red blush spread over his face. Clay barely contained a smile at the familiar mannerism. "You

read my thoughts?” George hissed, prodding at Clay's rib cage. “Were you trying to get into my head, or did something just fall out?”

“A thought just slipped out. Don't worry, I won't ever try to read your mind. That's super invasive.”

George groaned loudly, but he leaned into Clay's half embrace. Warmth spread through Clay like a beam of sunlight, and in the heat of the moment, he decided to push their newfound boundaries one last time.

“Stay with Tubbo and me tonight,” Clay said softly. “Just for tonight. It's late, and we're both going to have to go meet with the Council in the morning, anyway. I don't wanna leave you by yourself.”

George looked at him for a long moment, and Clay hid a wince. That had been a little too far, hadn't it? If George wasn't comfortable around him, Clay understood. It had only been one day. But he hated the thought of leaving George to-

“Alright. As long as Tubbo doesn't mind... I'd really appreciate that. Thank you.”

For a split second, Clay couldn't believe that the gods were, for once, actually on his side. Then he beamed at George and snapped his fingers. “Tubbo!” he called.

Tubbo immediately appeared at George's other shoulder. “Does that mean I can stay with you too, Master?” the brown-haired boy asked, a grin spreading over his face.

Clay leaned over to ruffle his padawan's hair. “Obviously,” he chuckled. “After all that, I don't think I'd let you go back to your quarters.”

Tubbo's grin was radiant, and George looked between the two of them with a confused frown. “Isn't that against the rules?” he asked slowly. “Padawans and Masters aren't supposed to share rooms.” Clay gave the shorter man a wide grin, and George rolled his eyes. “Right, of course, you two don't care about rules. What did I expect? Alright, let's go. I want to sleep. It's going to be a long day tomorrow.”

Clay led his companions out of the courtyard. They fell into quiet conversation as they headed for Clay's room, but Clay's mind was still on back in the courtyard. George was right; it was going to be a long couple of days. Despite having won this battle, things were far from over. And Clay didn't like how far he'd been beaten down by one attack.

Tubbo suddenly laughed, and Clay was dragged back to the present.

At least he could keep George and Tubbo safe for one more night.

## Chapter End Notes

Don't worry, Dream isn't helpless. I'm not about to pull a 180 and make him the helpless one that George always has to save. But he does have to work for his power, just like everyone else.

Thank you so much for reading! If you enjoyed this update, please drop a comment! I'll back next week with the resolution to this chapter! (Four parts, can you believe it? I can't. I might have gone a little overboard lol)





## Remember to Breathe, Part 4

### Chapter Notes

Welcome to the 9k finale of Chapter 3! I don't know how it got this long either, but I am super happy with how it turned out, so I can't complain too much. Once again, you've got a rollercoaster of a ride in store!

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

George woke up with adrenaline racing through his veins. It was nothing new, as he'd greeted every morning in the Temple with the fear that someone had finally gotten the jump on him. What was new, however, were the cream walls and dim lighting. George's heart rate spiked.

*Where am I? My room is brown, and there should be more light. It's never this dark. Where's my stuff? Where's Luca?*

A snore broke through George's downhill spiral. He took a couple of deep breaths and forced his heart to calm down. Slowly, his eyes adjusted to the darkness, and George could pick out the dark shapes of pillows and blankets strewn across the floor. He smiled faintly and leaned back into the cushions.

Clay and Tubbo were both still fast asleep. Since none of them had been comfortable by themselves, they'd piled into the living room for the night. His host had insisted on George taking the couch. While his back appreciated the gesture, George was starting to think that Clay and Tubbo had just wanted an excuse to make pillow forts.

Tubbo was curled up in a pile of pillows, his head half-buried under his arms. The padawan's chest rose and fell with the peace of someone fast asleep, and George made a mental note to tell Clay as such. It was undeniable that Tubbo felt totally safe around his master.

Speaking of the Jedi Master, where was Clay? George squinted into the darkness, searching for blond hair amongst the dark pillows. Eventually, he found Clay sitting upright against the foot of the couch, at least three blankets tucked around him. He faced away from George, but his shoulders were relaxed.

It was bittersweet, really. That was the most relaxed George had seen Clay all week.

George sat up and sighed, stretching his arms over his head. Gods, he didn't want to get up. But despite his body's cries for more sleep, he grabbed his holopad from the table and checked the time. 6:22 blinked back at him. George sighed again and rubbed his eyes. Even being back in the Temple hadn't broken his body's habits of rising early.

The holopad suddenly began blaring an alarm, and the screen flashed *"Incoming video call"* in big white letters.

"Oh, fuck you," George hissed, his heart racing, and he frantically pressed the accept button. He prayed that he hadn't woken up Clay or Tubbo.

Nick's face appeared on the holopad. "Where are you?" he demanded, just as loudly as the alarm. "Why's it so dark?"

"Shush!" George snapped. He swung the holopad around to show Nick the rest of the living room, including the sleeping frames of Master and Padawan. "I stayed with Clay and Tubbo! Now, will you please be quiet? They're still asleep!"

George turned the holopad back around and found that Nick's face had softened into a gentle smile.

"So that's where you went," the younger man said quietly. "Sorry. I went to the visitor rooms because I wanted to make sure you were still alive, and when you weren't there, I kinda panicked. Did I wake them up?"

Despite his still racing heart, George smiled fondly. "No, you didn't. Thanks for looking out for me."

"Yeah, of course." Nick settled back into his chair with a relieved sigh. After a moment, a smug smile spread over his face. "Clay, huh? I guess yesterday's conversation went pretty well, then."

George started to say, "Yes, it did," but Nick broke down into snickers before he could get the words out. George rolled his eyes and swiped at the screen. "Yes, it did," he said dryly. "And it's none of your business, but I will say that it was nice to talk to him. It'll take a lot of work, but... yeah. It was nice. A weight off the shoulders."

Nick made a gagging motion. "Saps."

"No, that's you, Sapnap."

"Oh, haha, very funny, *George*. I knew I shouldn't have brought you back."

George grinned at their banter, but the joke brought a more serious thought to mind. Was it his place to ask? Well, no. But he needed to know so that he didn't step on any toes. "Why does Clay call you Sapnap?" he asked. "I'd have thought he'd be the first person to not care about your public name."

Nick was silent. Just as George started to wonder if he should have kept his mouth shut (or if his holopad had frozen), Nick sighed and leaned forward in his chair. The younger man looked like he'd aged ten years.

"He calls me Sapnap because I call him Dream," Nick said carefully. It was clear that he was picking each word before he said it. "We aren't as close as we were when you left, George. I dunno, he went into his slump for a couple of years, and by the time I graduated, I didn't want him to call me Nick. We'd drifted apart, you know? We're still friends, but... it's different now."

George frowned. Well, what the hell was this about? The last people he'd ever expected to have a falling out were Clay and Nick. The two had always had such an easy friendship. "And, what?" he prompted. "You let him go through his 'slump' alone, and you were surprised when he changed?"

Nick shifted, discomfort written across his face. "I guess. Look, I'm realizing that I made a couple of mistakes, too, okay? I need to talk to him."

From somewhere in Tubbo's pile of pillows, the padawan let out a loud snort. George quickly muted his holopad and waited, just in case he'd accidentally woken one of his companions. But, to his relief, neither Clay nor Tubbo stirred.

“Sorry,” George muttered, unmuting his holopad. “I just don't want to wake them up too soon. It was a rough night, and they deserve to sleep.”

“Amen to that.” Nick tossed his feet onto whatever table supported his holopad and put his hands behind his head. Despite the casual movements, George could see the nervousness in Nick's eyes. “So, about last night. That whole lightning thing was... something. How'd you do that?”

“I'm not a Sith, Nick,” George snapped. His defensiveness quickly gave way to the anxiety that had been eating at him since he'd destroyed the drones and nearly passed out. “I mean, I don't think I am. The Dark Side comes when you give in to your emotions, right? I wasn't angry or anything. Well, I was, but... I didn't lose control or give in to anything. I just wanted to protect you - you, Clay, Bad, Tubbo, and everyone else. I don't know how I did it. I don't even know if I could do it again.”

George realized that he'd been rambling, and he quickly snapped his mouth shut. But Nick just nodded, seemingly unaware of how embarrassed George was. Maybe the darkness hid his red cheeks.

“That's good to know,” the younger man said absently, almost to himself. “Really glad you're not a Sith. Are you sure you weren't using Bad's magic or something?”

George immediately shook his head. “No chance. When Bad gave us magic, I was running around. I didn't even try to use the Force. The lightning was...” George swallowed nervously. He tried to push away thoughts of the Council, telling him that his power was uncontrollable. “The lightning was all me. But what about Bad? He's not going to get in trouble, right?”

Nick smiled broadly. “No, he'll be fine. That's one thing the Council got right.” He leaned forward to tap something on his holopad. Nick's eyes flicked across the screen for a moment, then he settled back into his chair. “Yeah, Bad's fine. Magic is still prohibited, but since Bad is literally a walking sack of magic, he has a pass. He went through this whole trial a couple of years ago and proved to the Council that he's tied his magic to the Light side. He can't do anything unless he does it with honorable intentions.”

“Okay, that's good, but his magic was red. Isn't that going to raise any flags?”

“Oh, no, that's fine, too. Color doesn't mean anything. If someone says that Bad went 'evil' 'cause his magic was red, they're a fucking moron. I think it's called 'deep magic' or something. I dunno. You'd have to ask him.”

George nodded, absorbing the information. Thank the gods that Bad was safe. The last thing he wanted was the daemon to deal with while he was recovering was the Council. George absently fiddled with the bracelet Bad had given him, and suddenly, another thought crossed his mind.

“What about you?” he asked.

Nick's brow creased slightly. “What about me?”

“The runes on your wrist. I saw Clay's wrist glowing, and it looked like runes had, like, burnt themselves into his skin. Did that happen to you, too? Are you okay?”

“Oh, yeah, I'm fine.” Nick raised his left wrist to the holopad's camera, and George was surprised to see several small runes tracing their way across the younger man's skin. They were exactly the same as Clay's runes. They didn't even look red anymore, just faintly golden. “They're just protection runes. Bad tattooed them on us a couple of years ago. See? No burns.”

“Good,” George murmured. A little twinge of jealousy pinged around his stomach, but he quickly pushed it aside. Maybe George could ask Bad for protective tattoos later. “Alright, I have to get moving. I don't know when our meeting with the Council is, but I really don't want to be late for that. We'll find you later, okay? Maybe the three of us can have lunch.”

Nick grinned widely. “Yeah, I'd like that. I'll talk to you later-” Nick's grin turned into a vicious smirk. “-*Georgie*.”

George only had time to snort before Nick ended the call. He shook his head and set his holopad onto the coffee table. Gods, it was good to talk to Nick again.

Right, he had to hurry. Their meeting had to be coming up soon. George reluctantly lifted himself out from under his blanket and crawled over to Clay. The taller man was still fast asleep, his head tilted away from George.

“Clay,” George said quietly. He shook the taller man's shoulder but only got a sleepy grumble in response. “Clay, wake up.”

Clay shifted slightly, and George sat back on his haunches, frustrated. Then the taller man began to lift his head, and George froze. A pale sliver of Clay's cheek was visible through curtains of ruffled, blond hair. George quickly looked away. He could barely see a thing, given how dark it was, but he wasn't going to take the chance.

Now what?

George chewed his lip and glanced around. Immediately, he found Clay's mask sitting on the coffee table. The taller man had probably taken it off before going to sleep.

George carefully got to his feet and walked over to Tubbo. He dug through the pillows until he found one of the padawan's limbs, then shook it gently. “Tubbo, wake up.”

The brown-haired boy mumbled incoherently, slowly rising from amongst his pillows. “I'm up,” Tubbo slurred. His sleep-laden voice made it clear that he was not “up.” “George? What are you doing here? Oh, that's right, you were... yeah. What time is it? When's your Council thing?”

“It's about 6:30,” George said, chuckling at the sleepy padawan. “And I don't know when the meeting is. I kind of need Clay for that.”

Tubbo squinted up at him. “Why are you waking me up, then?”

George grimaced. Hopefully, this wouldn't sound as stupid as it did in his head. “I need you to put his mask on. He didn't... just do it, please.”

Tubbo's eyes widened with understanding, and the brown-haired boy scrambled to his feet. George stared at the ground, listening as Tubbo plucked the mask from the table and padded over to his master. As curious as George was, he had no right to take Clay's choice away from him.

“Alright, it's on.”

At Tubbo's call, George glanced over his shoulder. Tubbo stood over his master, who was still fast asleep. Clay's face was once again hidden by the mask.

George's chest ached, but he didn't say a thing. *Clay will show me his face when's ready. This is a matter of privacy, and I just have to wait.*

Saying it didn't make George like the white mask or the smiley face drawn onto it any more.

"I can unlock his holopad if you'd like," Tubbo offered cheerfully. The padawan had wandered over to Clay's desk and now held his master's holopad. "I know the code and all that. If you don't want to worry about waking him up yet."

"Please do," George said, sighing in relief. "Is he still a heavy sleeper?"

Tubbo chuckled. "Oh, yeah. You could bring this room down with a jackhammer, and he'd sleep through it."

George huffed a laugh and joined Tubbo at Clay's desk. The padawan was tapping his way through the holopad's access screen, humming quietly as he worked. After a couple of seconds, Tubbo's face lit up in a grin, and he held the holopad out to George. "Here you go! The message from Master Eret!"

George accepted the holopad and scanned the short message. *Sent at 2 am.* George winced and reminded himself to be kind to Eret during the meeting. The poor man must have stayed up all night.

**Eret:** The meeting is at 7:30. The Council expects you and George to be there exactly on time, but don't worry if you're a couple of minutes late. After the night we've had, I don't blame you.

Eret might have given them a free "late pass," but George didn't want to get on the Council's bad side after only a week. He checked the time in the corner of the holopad. 6:37. Unless something had drastically changed over the years, Clay needed lots of time to wake up.

"Thank you, Tubbo," George said. He handed the holopad back to the padawan, who promptly locked it and placed it back on the desk. "The meeting is at 7:30, so I'm going to wake Clay up now. Are you going to stick around?"

Tubbo shook his head, but he didn't look happy to do so. "No, I think it's best if I go back to my quarters. Everyone's gonna start waking up soon, and Tommy can only cover for me for so long. I should probably get back before anyone notices I wasn't there."

George chuckled quietly. "Alright. I'll see you around, Tubbo."

"See you later, George."

Tubbo grabbed his holopad from the table, slid into his boots, then strode towards the door. The padawan was only a couple steps away from leaving when he paused and glanced back at George.

"You'll look after him, won't you? I felt him last night. He isn't doing so good."

George looked at Clay. The taller man was still asleep, his mouth hanging open slightly, and his hands twitching by his sides. George didn't need to have Tubbo's connection to know that Clay's sleeping hours were the only peaceful ones that he had. The taller man had a tortured soul.

"I'll look after him," George promised. He gave Tubbo a soft smile. "I have a couple of years to make up for."

Tubbo returned the smile, and for just a moment, George saw a younger Clay in Tubbo's bright eyes and toothy grin. Then the padawan was gone, the door hissing shut behind him.

George took a deep breath, then turned and headed to Clay's side. The taller man has grabbed one

of his blankets and buried his face into the fabric. "I'm never going to wake you up by force," George muttered aloud. "And I don't think shouting would work. It never has. What else can I do? Maybe..."

It was a risky idea. But it was the quickest option and the one most likely to succeed - even if George hated it.

George sucked in a breath, then carefully stretched his mind out to the Force. It responded instantly, warming his body like a cat laying across his chest. George shuddered. But he resolutely held onto the feeling and reached out towards Clay. Immediately, green sparks flew up George's fingers and filled him with a presence that was undeniably *Clay*. But it wasn't Clay, exactly... it was a reflection of him, one that the Force had made as a mirror to the real man.

*I don't know what I'm doing*, George thought nervously. He shoved Clay's Force presence away and reached directly into the taller man's mind. George gently tugged at Clay's sleeping consciousness, and the taller man's mind reacted to his touch, lifting towards awareness. Physically, Clay gave a tired grumble.

George yanked himself away from the Force and hissed as it tried to hold onto him. Gods, he hated that. He hated that so fucking much. George had tapped into the Force a couple of times while he'd been back at the Temple, but rarely had it been of his own accord. And even the lightning, which he'd more or less summoned through sheer willpower, hadn't required that much control.

"George?"

Clay's head had finally lifted, and he was looking around.

"Good morning," George said. He tried for a chuckle, but it didn't quite disguise the shake in his voice. "How do you feel?"

"Tired." Clay raised his hands towards his face, and his mouth twisted in confusion as his fingers hit the mask. "Wh- didn't I take this off? Where's Tubbo?"

"Tubbo already left," George said. He settled onto the ground next to Clay but was careful to not touch the taller man. George had noticed Clay jerk away from his touch the previous night, and he didn't want a repeat of... whatever that had been. "He wanted to get back before anyone noticed he was gone. And yes, you did take the mask off. But I woke up before you, so... I asked Tubbo to put it back on before he left."

For a moment, Clay just pressed his fingers to his mask. Then, slowly, a fond smile spread over his face. "Thank you," he said quietly.

Any lingering disappointment George had felt about not seeing Clay's face was washed away by the taller man's evident relief. "Of course," George said, just as quietly. "I dunno, I thought it'd be better for everyone. Anyway, now that you're up, you should use the bathroom first. Wash your face and all that."

Clay chuckled. "Sure. I'll do that." Silence fell over them for a moment, and George was content to let it be. Then Clay shifted to look at him, his head tipping slightly. "You okay, George?"

A shiver ran down George's spine. It was just a question that one friend would ask another when they were worried. But Clay's voice was still rough from sleep, and there was something in the taller man's concerned frown that made George's stomach feel airy.

"I'm fine," George said, trying for a light tone. He wasn't entirely sure if he succeeded. "I'm a little

stressed, but once we talk to the Council, I'm sure I'll feel better.”

Clay nodded. “Yeah. Look... I know we're still patching things up, but I'm here for you, okay? I'm not going to let the Council tear you apart again. I made that mistake once, and... I've got your back, is what I'm trying to say.” George didn't respond (because what was he supposed to say to such a genuine and heartfelt sentiment?), and the taller man stretched his arms over his head. “When's the meeting?”

“7:30,” George said. That was a safe question to answer.

“And what time is it right now?”

“Like, 6:45?”

“Shit. I actually have to get up.”

Clay clambered to his feet, and George gazed up at the taller man. Things had changed so much, and yet, the soft smile that Clay gave George hadn't changed at all.

“Can I shower first?” Clay asked, a bit sheepishly.

George rolled his eyes and got to his feet as well. “Of course you can, this is your room. I'm just a quest. Hurry up, though. I don't want to show up at the High Chambers with ash in my hair, and my face all dirty. The last thing I want is for them to think I'm a scrub.”

The corners of Clay's mouth twitched. “What are you talking about? You look amazing.”

A fluttery feeling suddenly appeared in George's stomach.

“I'm still in my pajamas, you heathen,” he scoffed. “Go get ready. I'll put your living room back together.”

Clay left the room, and George surveyed the damage that the three of them had caused. Pillows were strewn everywhere, blankets draped across every surface available, and a pile of boots sat next to the door. George grumbled to himself, then began picking up pillows.

His mind drifted back to Clay's soft smile, and George's chest tightened.

Clay really didn't hate him.

George was so lost in his feeling of warmth that he completely missed the flip his stomach did when he recalled the rough edge to Clay's voice.

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Bad carefully shuffled through the pile of books on his side table, sorting through the leather-bound covers until he found the one he wanted. He settled back against his bed and flipped through the first couple of pages. *Let's see what you have to say, Master Plo Koon*, Bad thought. *Maybe you can help my friend.*

It had been a quiet morning. After waking up in the infirmary (and being reassured that the Temple was safe), the medics had confined Bad to his bed. They wanted to be confident that his body was functioning at normal levels before they released him. So, having nothing else to do, Bad has asked one of the nurses to bring him a handful of very special books from the library.

The doors to the infirmary suddenly hissed open, and Bad looked up. A mop of brown hair bobbed

into the room, and Bad smiled brightly, closing his book. "Good morning, Tubbo! Or afternoon, I'm not really sure, to be honest. What can I do for you?"

Tubbo smiled back at Bad, but it didn't quite reach his eyes. *He looks tired*, Bad realized. *I wonder if he slept last night.*

"I'm sorry to bother you," Tubbo said sheepishly. He sank into the chair at Bad's bedside and folded his hands in his robes. "It's still morning, don't worry. But, um... honestly, there's not much for me to do right now. Master Dream is with the Council, and I can't find Tommy anywhere. I was going to do some research, but..." Tubbo glanced at the books on Bad's side table. "You kind of checked out everything I was going to look at."

Bad chuckled. He loved Tubbo's constant drive to learn and understand. It was part of what had made the young padawan one of his favorite students. "I'm sorry for getting in your way," Bad said, and he grinned slightly. "I should have known you'd want to do your own research. Alright, which books do you want? Ones about Force lightning, or ones about deep magic?"

Tubbo started to open his mouth, probably to say "Force lightning," but he paused. "Would you be willing to tell me about your deep magic?" the padawan asked. "As opposed to me just reading about it?" The hope in his voice wasn't lost on Bad.

Bad considered the idea. After nearly 3 years of teaching the padawan, Bad knew Tubbo well. There were many things he still wouldn't tell Tubbo, for a myriad of reasons, but daemon magic wasn't outlawed. In fact, Tubbo would probably find it fascinating. And, given that Bad was literally stuck in the infirmary until his body healed, teaching would probably make him feel better.

"Yes, I am willing to tell you about my magic," Bad said slowly. Tubbo's face lit up with a huge smile, and it warmed Bad's heart. "Okay, where do you want me to start?"

Tubbo was quiet for a moment. "First of all, are you alright, Master Bad?" Bad tilted his head, confused, and Tubbo made a vague gesture towards Bad's body. "The whole thing looked exhausting... I don't know. I just wanted to make sure you're doing okay."

Bad patted Tubbo's arm. "I'm doing fine, Tubbo," he said warmly. The padawan didn't need to know about the migraines and muscle fatigue that kept him confined to his bed. "Now, I'm going to tell you a lot, okay? But please, feel free to ask questions."

Tubbo opened his mouth again, then snapped it shut. He nodded once, slowly, carefully.

Bad settled himself into an upright position and moved his book aside. He could already feel joy growing in his chest, and he hadn't yet said a word. This was why he'd stepped away from the Order's frontlines. This was why he prepared lessons every day and taught even the most unruly students.

"Alright, first things first, I'm not in trouble." Bad drew his soul rune in the air, and it immediately shifted from the amber of his regular magic to dark red. "This is called deep magic. It's the purest embodiment of a daemon's soul, and the color varies from daemon to daemon. So, despite my deep magic being dark red, I'm not a Sith. I never plan to be a Sith. Color doesn't determine magical intent, okay? Color is a connotation associated with the Jedi and the Sith."

Tubbo rubbed the back of his neck. "I'm glad you mentioned that," the padawan said, and he sounded sheepish. "I'm not going to lie, I got a little nervous about your magic. I know it's silly, but--"



"It's not silly," Bad interrupted gently. He drew another rune in the air and held the two side by side. Amber and dark red burned in harmony. "You're a Jedi, Tubbo," he continued. "You're taught to beware people with red lightsabers, and with good reason. But let me ask you something. Have you ever seen Technoblade's lightsaber?" Tubbo shook his head, and Bad dismissed his runes with a smile. "It's red. Techno has a red lightsaber, but he's not evil. So even we Jedi aren't bound by color."

There was a lot more to Technoblade's history than just "he has a red lightsaber, but he isn't evil." But, given the circumstances, that was a story and a lesson for another day.

Luckily, Tubbo seemed to understand that it wasn't the time to talk about the pig Jedi. "So, your deep magic," the padawan said slowly. "Is it dangerous? I saw runes glowing Dream's wrist, and they looked... painful. Is he going to have burns or anything?"

"Oh, no, my magic is quite safe. I know it was a little volatile last night, but that's because my ritual started and ended with a bomb landing on my head. That's not very conducive to a smooth spell."

Once again, Bad drew runes into the air. The interlocked chain of six burned a warm amber, and Tubbo's eyes shone with wonder. "These are just protection runes," Bad said. He dragged a finger across the runes, and they shifted to a dark red hue. "Dream and Sapnap have these tattooed on their wrists, so I can always protect them. Last night, I used those runes as beacons for my magic. That's how I made them so powerful." Bad shook his head. "To be honest, I forgot that I'd given George a bracelet with the protective runes. I was just trying to lend my magic to Dream and Sapnap."

"I was wondering why George got powers, too," Tubbo murmured, his eyes still fixed on the glowing runes. "I haven't seen him use the Force in all the time he's been here."

Bad smiled sadly. "I haven't either," he said. *And I'm not surprised he hasn't.*

He waved his hand slightly, and his runes were swept away by an invisible wind. The two of them fell quiet, and Bad glanced at his young companion. Tubbo stared off into the middle distance, his eyes glazed over. *Poor kid*, Bad thought, gently putting a hand on Tubbo's shoulder. *He's been through a lot.*

"Are you alright?" Bad asked aloud. "It was a difficult night for all of us."

Tubbo was quiet for another long moment. Then, finally, he looked at Bad with hollow eyes. "I'm just worried about Dream," the padawan croaked. "You're the only reason he survived last night, Master Bad. What's going to happen when you're not there? I mean, I trust him, but... I'm scared."

*He's gone, Bad! And I let it happen! What am I supposed to do?*

Bad chewed his lip. He'd made a promise, years ago, to never say a thing about Dream's past. Since then, Bad had kept that promise every day, no matter who asked or what they offered (or threatened). But Tubbo needed to know something. Or else, the young padawan might fall apart.

"Your master is much stronger than I am, Tubbo," Bad said softly. He squeezed the padawan's shoulder. "My deep magic represents the strongest that I will ever be. But Dream? He has the potential to be that powerful without even trying. He's not helpless, Tubbo. Remember how his aura felt the very first time that you met him. Dream is..." Bad grinned faintly as he recalled one of the many training sessions he'd endured with Dream. "Dream is a beast. Put some faith in him, and he'll surprise you. Once he gets back on his game... he's gonna be unstoppable."

Tubbo nodded slightly. "I imagine George will help him with that?"

Panic and confusion crashed together in Bad's chest like the clang of a symbol. "What does George have to do with anything I just said?"

"I'm not stupid, Master Bad," Tubbo said. He began drumming his fingers on his leg, and Bad knew the nervous habit well. "I know they're connected, *somehow*. I just... I don't know how yet. I think Dream is going to talk to me soon, though. Maybe... maybe he'll tell me what's going on."

*It would help him, too*, Bad thought absently. "I hope he does," is what he said aloud. "Anyways, that's about all there is to say about my deep magic. Is there something else you wanted to know?"

Tubbo's eyes shifted to the pile of books Bad had amassed regarding the subject of Force lightning. Bad wanted to learn as much as he could about the Sith practice, and clearly, Tubbo wanted to do the same. But there was a nervousness and fear in the padawan's eyes that told Bad it wasn't the right time. If Tubbo started reading about Force lightning now, he might dub George a monster.

"What about the bombs?" Bad asked. "You said you know about those. How?"

Tubbo's expression changed to one of enthusiasm, and he launched into an explanation of the research he and Tommy had done over the past day. Bad listened attentively, but he carefully steered the padawan away from any mention of Dream and George, as well as George's abilities.

*Gods, I hope Dream talks to him soon. If he doesn't, Tubbo might start figuring things out by himself. And I don't know where that's going to lead.*

---

Of all the things Clay had expected the Council to say, the last thing on his list was, "Are you a Sith?" And, even more shockingly, it wasn't directed at him. It was directed at George. Considering the absurd (and rather offensive) nature of the statement, George was taking it quite well. Clay, however, was ready to commit a first-degree crime.

"No, Masters, I don't want to follow the Dark side," George said coolly. It was the fourth time he'd had to repeat himself, and Clay was astounded by how even the shorter man's voice was. "I don't know how I summoned Force lightning, but I wasn't trying to hurt anyone. I just wanted to protect my friends. Without me, all three of them would have died."

The Council murmured amongst themselves, and Clay barely kept from scowling. He desperately wanted to hop in and defend George from the crowd of vultures, but the shorter man had been firm: "Don't speak for me, okay? I want them to hear *me*."

"That's not the point, Engineer," Master Delphina ground out. She was a slim woman, with narrow, ice blue eyes that hadn't stopped flicking between Clay and George since they'd arrived. After Delphina's suspicion during the previous meeting, Clay was instinctively wary of her presence. "It is admirable that you saved your companions. But I want to know where you learned to use Force lightning. As you know, that is a Dark side skill. We will not have a Sith make a home inside our walls."

*"I'm not a Sith.* I spent the past four years of my life in the Underworld, working as an engineer. If I had been turned to the Dark Side, why didn't I come back and exact my revenge? I had no way of knowing that I would ever come back here. If you get a hold of Masters Philza and Technoblade, I can direct them to my shop. Aside from that, I can't prove anything."

George's annoyance was evident in the tight lines of his face, but his voice remained even. Clay

was genuinely flabbergasted. Then Delphina's eyes slid to Clay, and he stiffened instinctively.

“Have you sensed any seeds of darkness in him, Dream?” the Jedi Master asked archly. “You would know them the signs well, after all.”

The words landed like a punch in the gut. Clay's wince was hidden by his mask, but he didn't miss George's confused glance. Gods, the Council hated him, didn't they? Without Philza in the room, he really was friendless. “No, Master, I haven't sensed any seeds of darkness,” Clay said shortly. “And I don't think he's-”

“Dream's word counts for nothing,” Cho-Nal cut in sharply. “He is... compromised.”

This time, Clay couldn't hide his scowl. Had it been anyone else, he would have kept on talking. But no, Cho-Nal was determined to drag this meeting out as long as he could. How long had they been here? Two hours? Three? Maybe Cho-Nal was just waiting for Clay or George to snap.

“Master Cho-Nal, why is Master Dream compromised?” It was George, shoulders back and eyes cold. If he had been annoyed before, now he was visibly angry. “He performed admirably last night, just like Master Sarnap. Isn't this meeting supposed to be for the both of us? I *thought* it was a debrief.”

The Council broke into quiet mutters, and Clay scrubbed his mouth with a hand. Gods, four years in the Underworld had made George so much more vocal. It was good to see the shorter man standing up for himself, but at the moment, it wasn't an admirable quality. The Council just wanted to pin something negative on George and move on with their day. The fact that George was fighting back was the only reason that the meeting was still in session.

Maybe the shorter man's defiance wasn't such a bad thing, after all.

Clay caught Eret's gaze, and the Jedi Master gave him a frustrated scowl. A moment later, the other man's voice appeared in his head, quietly enough to avoid detection from the other masters.

*I'm so sorry, Dream, they voted to keep me quiet. I can't talk until after this meeting is over.*

Fantastic. The only person on Clay and George's side had been muzzled, probably by Cho-Nal.

Clay glanced at the shorter man, and his chest constricted. George's arms were crossed tightly over his chest, and his jaw was set. It had to be difficult for George to defend himself against the Council once again, no matter how much stronger he seemed to be. Clay gently shoulder-checked the shorter man, and he smiled a little once George looked at him.

*We'll get out of here soon,* Clay thought absently. *Just hang in there.*

To his great shock, George gave him a tired smile. *Thanks. I'm amazed I made it this far, to be honest. I thought it'd be easier to hear the whole “You're a Sith” spiel, but I guess the second time isn't any better than the first. I don't know what to tell them, either. Gods, I wish Philza was here.*

George's thoughts were so clear, it sounded like he was talking aloud. Clay cast a frantic look around the room, waiting for one of the Council members to turn a harsh stare on them. But no one did. No one looked up, no one cast them a glance. Even Eret was coldly watching a conversation between two other Jedi. Had no one heard them?

Clay shifted his gaze back to George. The shorter man just watched him passively, one eyebrow raised.

*They can't prove anything, Clay thought hesitantly. He still wasn't entirely sure that they were going unheard. All they have is yellow lightning and the fact that you responded to Bad's magic. It's all circumstantial. You were a padawan, so it makes sense that you'd react to Bad's magic.*

*It's not even because I was a padawan. The only reason I got part of his magic is because he gave me a bracelet with protection runes on it. I even told these idiots about it!*

*I know, I know. We'll get out of this, George.*

*How? We're kind of cornered.*

*I don't know yet. But we'll figure it out.*

Clay turned back to the Council and found Eret looking at him. The other man's eyes were alight with sharp curiosity, and slowly, his gaze shifted to George. A pang of fear hit Clay in the gut. Oh, gods, what was Eret thinking? Clay didn't know enough about the other Jedi to know if Eret was truly on his and George's side.

“Alright, tell us one more time, Engineer.” It was Delphina, who had finally emerged from her conversation with Cho-Nal. “What Force-”

“No,” George cut in sharply. A ripple spread through the Council, and for a moment, fear touched Clay's mind. “Why is Master Dream compromised? Why is he invalidated in this conversation?”

For the first time in his life, Clay desperately wished that George wasn't fighting for him.

“Why?” Delphina repeated incredulously. “Because he-”

Delphina cut herself off, and slowly, her eyes narrowed to slits. Unease climbed in Clay's throat until he felt like he was choking. The Council was many things. They could be malicious, ungrateful, and bullheaded. Ultimately, they always acted with nothing but what they believed the people's best interests to be. But right then, looking into Delphina's eyes, Clay was absolutely certain that the woman had nothing but her own interests at heart. If he didn't know better, he would have sworn she wore a hungry look.

...but did he really know better? How easy it would be for someone to become corrupt within a coalition of people who were all blinded by the people's best interests. What if Delphina really was planning something of her own?

Delphina slowly lifted her chin, and she gave George an icy smile. “What Master Dream has done is none of your concern, Engineer,” she said, silkily smooth. “Now, please, answer my question. What Force abilities do you currently possess?”

George fixed Delphina with a cold look. “Before last night, I could project my thoughts to one person, create weak mental shields, and I experienced some mild visions. Now, apparently, I can sense pockets of energy and create Force lightning. That is everything I can do.”

Clay frowned and glanced at the shorter man. George wasn't lying, exactly, but he wasn't telling the truth either. His mental shields were impeccable. He had basically built a mental fortress around his mind, one that couldn't be dismantled with anything short of a loud distraction and an experienced Jedi Master. George had told the truth so far. Why had he suddenly decided to lie?

Then, like a flash of lightning, Clay understood.

“Out on the tarmac, when I first showed up, you heard me?”

*“I haven't used the Force in years. I don't think I could even make a pencil move. I can do really weak mental shields, and that's it.”*

*“I did use lightning. That... that was me.”*

*You don't know*, Clay realized, with something akin to horror bubbling up in his chest. *You don't know how powerful you really are. You never have.*

“Are you absolutely positive that is all you can do, Engineer?”

Clay pulled himself out of his thoughts and found George giving Delphina a nasty glare.

“Yes, Master,” the shorter man said sharply. “Why would I lie to you? I don't have any motive to tell you anything other than the truth.”

Delphina's eyes narrowed once again, and for the second time, unease swirled in Clay's stomach. Even when Philza or Eret (or his own master) had gotten angry at him, Clay had never felt the fear that he did when Delphina clenched her fists. She put Clay on edge, but he couldn't put his finger on why. Did anyone else feel it?

“Do you dare to mock us, civilian?” Delphina hissed.

Anger danced in George's eyes, turning them from soft chocolate to a fiery amber. “I'm not mocking you, Master. Everything I just told you is 100% the truth.”

“Engineer, I get the feeling that you're not taking this seriously.”

Clay felt George's self-control snap, and he silently prayed to every god that he knew of.

“I am taking this seriously!” George barked. “In case you forgot, my safety is on the line here! But I can't give you proof that doesn't exist! The only measure I have for what makes me a Sith is my own emotions, and I'm telling you that I didn't lose control last night! Which, by the way, means that you've been wrong twice!” Delphina reeled back, and George's lips curled in a sneer. “You thought I forgot, didn't you? No, I remember you. You were one of the convicting votes in my hearing. Tell me, Master Delphina, did you take over this meeting because you knew it was me? Did you want to get off on beating me down again?”

“*Silence!*” Delphina roared. “I did nothing of the sort, Engineer! It is appalling to see that you are so self-absorbed as to think that I still have some sort of vendetta against you! Perhaps you should consider the Jedi on your left instead?”

At that moment, Clay knew that something was horribly wrong.

*Eret, we need to get her out of here*, Clay thought, projecting the thought to the Jedi Master. Eret's eyes flicked over to meet his.

*I can't, Dream. She's the leading Jedi in this meeting.*

*Eret, you know just as well as I do that this is wrong.*

*...yeah, I know.*

Clay slipped out of the mental conversation in time to see Delphina rise from her chair.

“Force lightning is a Dark side skill, Engineer!” the woman shouted. “You have already been convicted by this Council once before for misuse of the Force! Now, how do you explain your

abilities?”

“I can't! I'm--”

For the first time since the meeting began, panic flashed across George's face. That was it. Clay had been standing by passively this whole time, half to respect George's wishes, half to keep the both of them safe, but he was done. He'd made a promise, and he refused to let the Council come after George again.

Clay grabbed George's arm and pulled the shorter man behind him, acting as a physical shield. As soon as Clay touched George's arm, his mind was assaulted with a thousand emotions, each spinning wildly out of control. *You really don't know what you can do, huh?* Clay thought, steeling his mental shields against the onslaught.

“Master Dream, move away from the civilian!”

Delphina's glare was infused with fury, and for a moment, Clay almost broke. Then he felt George grip his arm with a trembling hand, and Clay glared back at the Jedi Master. Who did Delphina think she was?

“Master Delphina, all due respect, but you're shouting at him,” Clay said coldly. Delphina's face darkened, but, to Clay's relief, he noticed several of the other masters were already giving Delphina horrified looks. So he hadn't imagined it. “George is a civilian, and I don't think *this* is the image we should give to the people. I mean, aren't we supposed to help others? *Not try to turn them against the people that you told them to make amends with?*”

That last sentence was a dangerous one. But most of the Council nodded and murmured to each other, giving Delphina worried looks. Clay glanced at Eret, and the other man nodded slightly. Eret rose from his chair and slipped to Cho-Nal's side.

Clay looked directly at Delphina. The woman was seething, her shoulders rising and falling with anger that was far beyond the Jedi Code. *You're not who you say you are*, Clay thought, narrowing his eyes at the Jedi Master. *I'm sure of it.*

After a long moment, Cho-Nal raised his head from his conversation with Eret. “This Council is taking a 10-minute intermission,” he called. “We will reconvene at 10:05 exactly. Master Dream and Engineer George, your presences are no longer required. Dismissed.”

Slowly, the Council rose from their chairs and shuffled towards the doors. Clay stood still, staring straight ahead as several of the Council members gave him concerned looks. When Delphina passed by, Clay could have sworn he felt claws rake across his arm. Then she was gone.

As soon as the doors closed behind the last Council member, Clay let out a breath. “That went well,” he muttered.

Eret, who hadn't left either, settled back into his chair. “Yeah, that was... not ideal,” he said heavily. “I'm sorry for not saying anything, George. Cho-Nal is worried that I've become 'enamored, much as Philza has,' so he told me to keep quiet - his exact words, by the way. Are you alright?”

George finally stepped out from behind Clay, and he rubbed his face. “No,” he mumbled, voice muffled by his hands. “That was the worst thing I've had to do all year.”

Eret smiled tiredly. “I can imagine.” Eret turned to Clay, and his gaze hardened. “I don't say this lightly, and I don't want it spreading around. But you're right, Dream. Something is wrong with

Delphina. Even though George was very antagonistic, she should never have raised her voice. I don't know what happened.”

“Will you look into it?” Clay asked. This, to him, was the moment of truth. If Eret chose to investigate one of his fellow Council members, then he was breaking a cycle of ignorance and arrogance that had bogged down the Council for years.

“Yes,” Eret said immediately. “I won't let the Council drag you two into another meeting until I know what's wrong with Delphina.”

Clay blinked. He glanced at George and found that the shorter man looked just as startled as he felt. So, that was it. They had two friends on the Council: Philza and Eret.

“Before you go, I have two things to talk to you about, George.” Eret settled back on his chair and gave George a searching look. “As much as it was Delphina's fixation, don't worry about your Force lightning. I have a couple of ideas, and I don't think it'll end up being a problem. But I am concerned about your other skills. When's the last time you willingly opened yourself up to the Force?”

George hesitated, and Clay could see the indecision in the shorter man's eyes. Eventually, George sighed.

“Just this morning, Master,” George said tiredly. “To wake up Cla- Master Dream before this meeting. But before that, I haven't used the Force in years. I never practiced anything except for mental shielding. That was kind of a handy skill in the Underworld.”

Eret smiled faintly. “Please, just call me Eret. And you're free to call him Clay around me. I'm not really one for formality.”

Clay was starting to understand why Philza had teamed up with Eret.

“But, George, listen.” Eret steepled his fingers and took a deep breath. “We believe that you accidentally injured your mind. You repressed your connection to the Force for so long that it stunted your growth. Now that you're being exposed to the Force again, your mind is trying to catch up. That's why your powers are coming back. I know you aren't telling me everything, and I understand. But if you want you to get yourself under control, you're going to have to train again.”

Panic rolled off of George in waves, and Clay put a gentle hand on the shorter man's back. *It'll be okay*, he thought. *I promise*. George leaned into the slight touch, and Clay's heart squeezed.

“I know it's a daunting thought, George,” Eret said softly. The sadness in his eyes said that he knew why George was so hesitant to open himself to the Force again. “But you will be safer. And, honestly, you might feel better, too. If you refuse to do this, we won't push it onto you. But we believe it will help.”

“Who's we?” George asked slowly. “The Council? You? Cho-Nal?”

The corners of Eret's mouth twitched with a smile. “Myself and Philza. I managed to get a hold of him last night, and he agrees with my assessment. He'd even be willing to help you once he returns.”

George fell quiet. Clay could basically see the cogs turning in George's brain, and he prayed that the shorter man agreed. If George refused, then Clay would never bring it up. But he knew how painful and damaging repressing the Force could be. Clay had tried, and now, he would wear scars for the rest of his life.

Finally, George sighed. "I'll do it," he murmured. "But I won't train with anyone from the Council. I mean, except for Philza. But aside from him, I'll only work with my friends."

"That's all I'm asking for," Eret said, and relief was evident in his voice. "Thank you for being willing to try. One more thing, and then you're free to leave, I promise. Given your Underworld ties and your proficiency in combat, we'd like you to assist in investigating the recent attacks. You wouldn't be leading a group or anything like that; you'd just be joining an existing task force."

George nodded immediately. "That I can do."

"Good. Dream, you're his partner."

It came so suddenly, Clay choked on his own breath. "I'm sorry, what?" he asked hoarsely.

Eret cocked an eyebrow. "You're his partner. George can't investigate without a partner; he'd be killed. And you said you two are friends again, so you're partners. Like Philza and Techno, you aren't joined at the hip, but you're stuck together for missions. Do either of you have a problem with that?"

"No problem, Master," Clay said. *Oh, Eret, you don't even understand. This is the best possible situation that you could have given me.*

"George?" Eret asked lightly.

George gave Clay a faint smile. "Well, he can be a bit of an asshole. But yes, I'm willing to work with him. I won't have a problem."

Eret grinned, and the expression looked more natural than anything else he'd worn for the past hour and a half. "Good," he said, clapping his hands. "Once this meeting finishes up, I'll send you a message, Dream. I think you two should know what we decided. Alright, you two are dismissed. Go get some lunch or something. You earned it."

Clay grinned back. "Thank you, Eret. I really appreciate everything you're doing."

Eret tipped his head slightly. "Yeah, well... I'm on your side. Just like I'm supposed to be."

Thank the gods that two good men had gotten onto the Council. Clay bowed deeply, which earned him a chuckle from Eret, then dragged George out of the room. To his relief, the hallway was deserted. As soon as the two of them turned the corner and escaped the hallway, George let out a frustrated howl.

"Gods, that was such a disaster," the shorter man growled. "I never want to see the Council again. And Cho-Nal, what the fuck does he-"

"No," Clay interrupted, holding up a hand.

George glanced at him, confused. "What? But-"

"No."

"I-"

"Stop it."

"Clay-"



Clay turned and grabbed George's shoulders, halting both of them in their tracks. "Stop it," he enunciated. "There's nothing we can do about the Council. We just have to leave things to Eret and not worry about it. Look, I know that was stressful. I hated every second of that, too. Let's not relive every single second of it all over again. Eret said that we should go have lunch, and you told Sapanp that we would meet up, right? So, let's go have lunch."

For a long moment, George just looked at Clay, his expression unreadable. Then, slowly, a brilliant smile stretched across his face. It was the first one Clay had seen from him since that morning.

"Alright," George said softly. "You're right. I really want to hang out with you two again."

"Yeah, exactly. So... come on. No talking about the Council."

"Alright, alright, I won't. I'll call Nick and tell him to meet us somewhere. Where do you want to go?"

Clay grinned as he remembered one of the buildings that had popped while George had been exiled. "A sushi shop opened up just outside the Temple," he offered innocently. "What about that?"

George's mouth dropped open. "Are you serious? Once I leave, *then-*" George cut himself off with a huff, and he grabbed Clay's arm, dragging him towards the Temple gates. "You call Nick. I'm getting us there as fast as I can."

Clay laughed and let himself be dragged along. Following George's order, he pulled his holopad out of his robes and called Sapanp, telling him of their plan. Sapanp's response was a resounding "Hell yeah!" and soon, the three of them stood at the door to the sushi shop. For the next two hours, Clay didn't think about the Council once. He just laughed and ate and talked with his best friends.

For a few hours, the three of them could just be friends again.

## Chapter End Notes

And thus concludes Remember to Breathe! As always, thank you so much for reading! And, if you're so inclined, please drop a comment or leave some kudos!

Due to some personal stuff and creativity issues, I'm going to take a two-week break. If I get really inspired, you'll see me next week. But, more likely than not, you'll see me two Saturdays from now (Nov 14). Thank you all so much for your support, and I hope y'all have a wonderful two weeks :D

# Once for Honor, Twice for Valor, Part 1

## Chapter Notes

Greetings and salutations, friends - I'm back! These two weeks have been so good for my creativity, and I am ready to give y'all a fantastic chapter! We've got a bit of a shorter update today, but I still loved writing it. I hope y'all enjoy it, too!

(Heads up, I'm making a slight change to my publishing schedule, which I will address in the endnote!)

On to the story!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

George took slow steps across the cobblestone; left foot, then right. Philza stood motionless in the very center of the arena, watching him with a passive gaze. The blond man's lightsaber burned a furious green.

“Remember, use what you see to your advantage,” Philza called evenly. “Be cautious, but not hesitant. One of your greatest strengths is your adaptability. Don't cripple yourself.”

George appreciated the advice, but at the moment, he wasn't feeling particularly skilled in any way, shape, or form. He'd faced Philza several times, and each session ended with him at the painful end of a lightsaber. For the first time since he'd acquired his staff, George wanted a tool that was better suited to fend off lightsabers.

*Another lightsaber?*

*No!* he snapped, physically shaking the thought out of his head. *I can beat him like this. I just have to focus.*

Philza was the quintessential example of a skilled warrior. What he lacked in brute strength, he made up for with a devious mind and reactions that would put a cat to shame. He also knew pieces of every lightsaber form, and his mastery of both Makashi and Ataru made him a versatile and fluid duelist. In other words, Philza was nearly impossible to land a hit on and nearly impossible to evade.

So, how to beat an unbeatable opponent? Simple – George couldn't. But he could weaken Philza until the Jedi Master slipped up. That was the only chance George had to keep from having his ass handed to him.

Again.

George steeled his grip on his staff and launched forward. Alright, first target. Philza clearly favored his left foot, putting most of his weight on his right. That indicated an injury. It was probably an old injury, given that Philza didn't walk with a limp, but it was still a weak point. If George could land a hit, it would be harder for Philza to maneuver.

George spun in a wide arc, then brought his staff down towards Philza's shoulder. The green lightsaber rushed up to meet him, catching his staff and shoving it away. With the momentary

distraction on his side, George shot out his foot to hook Philza's weak ankle. Nothing was there.

“Too obvious!” Philza chided. The blond man shoved George's arm (a bit harshly, in George's opinion), and George had to twirl in a bizarre dance move to rebalance himself. “I know that you know this is an old injury,” Philza continued, sweeping his lightsaber over his right foot. “But I'm clearly not protecting it. When you're facing someone like me, you should never target injuries. Chances are, your opponent actively uses their weak points to *their* advantage. Try again.”

George ground his teeth. Philza was right, of course. Gods, he wished he could level the playing field! He was nothing more than a punching bag for the Jedi Master!

A wave of energy pulsed under George's skin. He flinched and quickly suppressed the frustration that had wormed into his mind. But the Force persisted, itching at the edges of his nerves and undercutting his focus. George blinked the sweat from his eyes with a scowl.

When Eret had first posed the idea of reopening his connection to the Force, George hadn't liked it, but it had seemed doable. Now, George knew that it was as painful as stepping through a bed of nails.

Four years of separation from the Force wasn't easily done away with.

“Focus,” George hissed aloud. He couldn't afford to get distracted! In a real fight, Philza would have taken him apart with two blows. He always had to be on guard, ready for anything that would come his way! With a rush of anger, George threw himself at Philza.

Something in his blood suddenly lit on fire, and George screamed in pain. His eyesight completely abandoned him, and his staff went tumbling from his hands. George could only let out a feeble groan before the ground rushed up to meet him, and an aching cold seeped into his fingers. George was vaguely aware of Philza's voice, but it was distant and fuzzy. George just had to rest for a second... why was he resting? Wasn't he angry? No, he wasn't angry anymore, just tired. Yes, so, *so* tired. But why?

A buzz of energy crackled through George's body, wrapping tendrils of pain across his chest. George tried to scream again, but it only made his lungs burn as hot as a sun.

Ah, that was right. The Force wasn't too happy about being ignored for four years.

“George, listen to me. You're drowning yourself. Stop panicking and follow my voice.”

Panicking? George wasn't panicking. He was perfectly calm and rational. And, even if he *was* panicking, the voice was full of the same painful energy that was currently tormenting George's body. Why would he want to follow the voice?

“George, I'm serious. Get out of your head.”

He was *fine*, thank you very much. George didn't need the voice's help!

But curiosity was an insatiable thing. George slowly opened up his mind, and he realized that pain signals were being sent from every part of his body. And, once he fell silent, he also realized that his thoughts were nothing more than agonized gibberish. The voice was right. Something *was* very wrong. George clenched his jaw against the pain, then shoved himself through the haze of energy. A flash of pain, and then-

Fresh air flooded George's lungs. He took a gasping breath, bolting upright like a flatlining patient come back to life. His head cleared of fuzziness that he hadn't even noticed, and slowly, his vision

returned.

“There you go,” Philza said gently. The blond man's soft voice sounded like the call of an angel to George's tender eardrums.

“What happened?” George slurred. His tongue was thick in his mouth, and he wasn't sure if he actually got the words out.

Philza's face creased with worry. “I don't know,” he murmured. “Honestly, George, your guess is as good as mine. Your eyes rolled back in your head, and then you collapsed. I only knew to call you back to consciousness because of a passage about meditation that Will showed me. Whatever you felt is probably the best indicator of what happened.”

George heaved a sigh and laid back down. “Fantastic,” he muttered. “Even the great Philza doesn't know what's wrong with me.”

In truth, George wasn't angry or disappointed with Philza. He was just angry at himself. Who had George thought he was, trying to run away from the Force? For as little as he cared about the Jedi's teachings, he knew that the Force was a constant presence. The heartbeat of the universe, some had called it. George had experienced the sensation of being inexplicably connected to life itself multiple times as a padawan, and now, he had to get used to that heartbeat again.

“I think it might have been overstimulation,” George said quietly, glancing up at Philza. “It happened sometimes when I was a padawan. I'd blackout for hours at a time, and once I woke up, I'd have the worst headaches. It's the same way now, it just—” Right on cue, a headache bloomed in George's temples. He let out a defeated sigh and pressed one of his palms to the throbbing point. “It just doesn't take me as long to wake up.”

Philza shook his head and straightened from George's side. “Well, you've always been powerful,” the Jedi Master said, with a hint of his usual cheerfulness. “I'm not surprised that bonding to the Force a second time is difficult.”

The blond man held out a hand, and George gratefully accepted the help, pulling himself to the feet. The arena immediately started spinning. “Oh, I wish I'd never left,” George groaned. “Then I wouldn't have to deal with this 'the Force is mad at me' bullshit.”

Worry rippled George's shields, and once he could see straight, he glanced at Philza. The Jedi Master's face was passive, but his concern was evident beneath his shields.

George smiled faintly. “Don't worry, I'm not that easily broken,” he said, and he even managed a tired smile.

Surprise broke Philza's blank expression. “I didn't say you were,” he said slowly.

“You thought it.”

“You heard what I was thinking?”

George frowned. “Of course I did. You weren't very quiet. Were you trying to be quiet?”

For a second, they just looked at each other. Then Philza heaved a heavy sigh. The sound conveyed more than George would have liked, and a 10-pound weight settled in his stomach.

“Right,” George muttered. “I forgot. I'm stronger than I think I am.”

He didn't feel strong in the slightest. He'd just blacked out after touching the Force with barely a toe! And yet, somehow, George could look through mental shields as if they weren't even there. If George ever found a way to commune with the Force, he planned to shout at it until it explained why his powers were so inconsistent. Or he'd just shout until he felt better. Both options were appealing.

"Do you need a break?" Philza asked gently. The Jedi Master had lost his look of concern and instead wore a warm smile.

If it had been anyone else in the world, George would have glared at them and said that he wanted to go again. But since it was Philza, George nodded slightly and said, "Yeah. I'm going to sit down for a bit. Once my head stops pounding, we can go again."

George wandered away from the blond man and headed for the opposite side of the arena. His head throbbed, his feet ached, and each step felt like a monumental effort. Everything was going so wrong. George hadn't expected overnight results, but he'd hoped that a couple days of hard training would yield *some* improvement. After all, when he'd been a padawan, the Force had been nearly boundless to him. Why did it now insist on sending George into shock and torturing his body whenever he tried to open up?

The fact that Philza didn't know how to help him was honestly the most discouraging part of the situation.

The only shady spot in the arena (provided by a tree that poked over the edge of the arena walls) waved invitingly. George didn't need much convincing. He sank to the ground, closing his eyes and letting the slight breeze soothe his burning muscles. Jedi training was proving to be more vigorous than he and his body had remembered.

*I should train with Nick tomorrow, George thought absently, his brain lulled into peace from finally sitting down. I actually have a chance of beating him. Maybe I can rope Ant into it, too. It'd be fun to spar with both of them. I also need to return those books to Bad... and I have to talk to Clay since he still needs me for those reports.*

A strong presence suddenly broke through George's mental planning. It was familiar but deadly sharp. George opened one eye and found Techno talking to Philza, both of their backs turned. George frowned. That was one thing he couldn't get over. George could sense almost everyone before they entered his space of awareness. He'd tried with multiple people (who had ranged from Clay to Wilbur to Skeppy to some random padawan), all to identical results. George felt their presence before they arrived.

Techno was the only wild card. No matter how hard George concentrated, Techno was a ghost on his radar. It was... disturbing, to say the least. George had survived in the Underworld by never letting anyone slip past his radar.

Another presence suddenly appeared somewhere over George's head. It was much softer than Techno's and carried a distinctive air of arrogance. George looked up and found a pair of bright blue eyes gazing back at him.

"Hello, Tommy," George called, with the barest hint of a grin.

The eyes huffed loudly, then dropped from the tree that provided George's patch of shade. Tommy (because of course, it was he) landed with a grunt and began ruffling the leaves out of his hair.

"How'd you know I was there?" Tommy grumbled. "I shielded and everything, and that's supposed

to hide me from literally everyone. What's the point in doing what Wilbur teaches me if it doesn't work against people like you?"

George cocked an eyebrow. "And what am I, Tommy?"

The blond padawan made several vague gestures and spluttering noises before finally stringing together a coherent sentence. "A powerful guy. A really fucking powerful guy, whose mind is literally a fucking fortress. It's so annoying. You and Dream are the only people that I can't read."

"You can't read Clay's mind?" George asked, amused. He knew that he should send Tommy away before Philza or Techno noticed that he had arrived, but George was too entertained to care.

Tommy glared at him. "No, I can't," the padawan snapped. "And I don't appreciate that tone. I can read the minds of almost everyone else in this shithole, so a couple of weirdos like you aren't a big deal."

The fact that Tommy called the Jedi Temple a "shithole" was a little worrisome to George, especially with Philza and Techno so close by. Granted, Techno seemed to have grown up to be an anarchist, but George didn't want to get him or Tommy into trouble. "You're not supposed to be here, Tommy," he sighed. "It's training hours. Why aren't you with Wilbur right now?"

Tommy finally fell silent. He stared at a point somewhere near George's left boot, and a pang of sympathy hit George's heart. Despite being loud and talented, Tommy was still just a kid. He was living through one of the worst crises that the Temple had ever seen. Honestly, George was astounded that the padawan had made it thus far without cracking.

"Wilbur is busy," Tommy said eventually, quietly. "After Techno and Master Philza got back, all he's been doing is sorting files. I don't think the task force will give him a break."

George wasn't surprised. Philza and Techno had returned from the Underworld three days prior, exhausted and with nothing to show for their efforts but a run-in with a mysterious spy and some snippets of information. A legendary manufacturer (who had remained nameless to George) had been confirmed as part of the Temple attacks, but that meant nothing unless the task force dug up some reliable connections.

George had escaped being tied to a desk, but clearly, Wilbur hadn't shared his luck. Tommy's eyes were still fixed on the floor. Even if George hadn't felt the emotions rippling off of the blond boy, he recognized the forlorn stare and slumped shoulders of a lonely padawan.

"I have to pick up some files from the task force later," George mused absently. "It wouldn't hurt to check on Wilbur, maybe take a couple of files off his hands. Do you know which ones he's dealing with?"

The blond boy's gaze snapped up to meet George's, and hope lit in his eyes like a fresh candle. "Yeah, I do. Master Rhodys has him looking at all the information we have on Illumina."

George frowned. "Illumina?" he repeated. "I know him. He's been in my shop a couple of times."

For a moment, Tommy went as still as a statue. Then the padawan just about exploded. "You know him?" Tommy demanded. "We've been interrogating our contacts and searching through every fucking section in the Archives for *days*, and you know Illumina? You met him, interacted with him, and potentially learned a lot of information about him? What the fuck, man?!"

"The task force doesn't tell me about all of their leads!" George protested. "You really think that they're going to let me in that quickly? Some of them don't even trust me!" Tommy grumbled,

clearly unconvinced, and George couldn't help an incredulous laugh. "Look, I'll talk to Eret or Rhodys about this later. Maybe I do know something that can help."

"Something that can help, my arse," Tommy muttered, still scowling. "Wilbur has been slaving away, and you're out here having a grand old time with Master Philza. You should be ashamed of yourself."

The bright hope in Tommy's eyes had been replaced by his usual bluster and energy, but George had finally seen the padawan's softer side. He smiled slightly.

"You're worried about Wilbur, aren't you, Tommy?"

"No!" The response was immediate, and the padawan's cheeks flushed a little redder than usual. "I'm just- he won't be much help to anyone if he's exhausted. He barely sleeps- not that I know, of course. I- no, I'm not worried. It's just obvious that Wilbur needs a break. You- thank you for going to check on him, I guess. Not for me, just- for everyone's sake."

"You're welcome," George chuckled. "I'm happy to help."

Tommy's eyes narrowed. "Are you making fun of me?" the blond boy asked suspiciously. "Because I already told you, I don't need your help. Wilbur does."

"Wouldn't you know if I was making fun of you? I hear that you're very Force-sensitive."

George had meant it as a jibe, a way to ease the padawan's embarrassment. But, to his surprise, Tommy just slumped.

"Yes, I am," Tommy muttered. "But I can't feel anything from you. I've tried everything, but you're just a metal wall in my head. Some people are like clouds, and Will is basically an open book. Dream is a little harder. Like, sometimes he's an electromagnetic fence that I have to sneak through. But you're either a solid steel wall, or you're not there at all. It's really, really creepy."

"And why are you telling me this?" George asked slowly. From what little he knew and had seen of Tommy, he would have thought that the padawan would rather die than admit he couldn't do something.

Tommy shrugged awkwardly. "I dunno," he mumbled. "I was kind of hoping you'd... tell me how you can disappear. Control the Force so well. You and me are similar, so..."

Every bone in George's body longed to say, "I'm not like you." Even his heart claimed that it was the truth. But if training with Philza and being in the Temple again had taught him anything, it was that he was just like Tommy.

Looking at the padawan in front of him, knowing that he possessed the same kind of power was terrifying.

"I'll let you know once I know what I'm doing," George said, giving Tommy a tired smile.

The padawan frowned. But before the blond boy could say anything, Philza's voice rang out from the other side of the arena.

"Tommy, you're not supposed to be here! George, get over here!"

Tommy winced. "That's my cue to get the fuck out. Good talking to you, George. I'll see you around."

With that, the blond padawan launched himself out of the arena. George watched with him with a bemused smile. If there was anything he'd learned from that conversation, it was that talking with Tommy was like trying to keep track of an overly hyper dog. He shook his head, then headed towards Philza and Techno.

"You look terrible," Techno said, in place of a greeting.

"Thanks," George said dryly. "Is that all you wanted to tell me?"

"Oh, no, there's some other stuff, too. Phil?"

Technoblade had never been known for his tact, so the fact that the pig Jedi wasn't willing to explain why he was at the arena made George unreasonably nervous.

"Techno brought us a message from Bad," Philza began, and he folded his hands inside his robes. It was another sign of hesitancy that further amped up George's nerves. "And Bad thinks that you're having so much trouble with your Force connection because you're using your staff."

George blinked. "That's it?" he asked incredulously. Philza heaved a deep sigh, and George's hopes sank. "Of course it isn't."

"Of course it isn't," Philza agreed. "The staff isn't the whole problem. It's mostly what you associate the staff with: being exiled and having to hide who you are. Your staff is a marvel of engineering, and you should absolutely keep it. But since connecting to the Force requires so much mental effort, it might do you good to have a different weapon."

A heavy ball suddenly appeared in George's stomach, and he swallowed the tendrils of anxiety that threatened to choke him. "What are you saying?" he asked hoarsely.

Techno brought his left hand out from inside his robes, revealing a slim, gold-and-white hilt. "He's saying that you're gonna need this."

The energy radiating off of the lightsaber made George's fingertips tingle. He reached for the hilt, and at Techno's nod, took it with shaking hands. The metal was polished to perfection, and each piece fit together like the universe itself had crafted it. It was an exceptional piece of craftsmanship.

"This is amazing," George breathed. He was so awestruck that he couldn't even find it in himself to despise the fact that he was holding a lightsaber again.

A small smile pulled at the corners of Techno's mouth. "You've definitely got a friend in the Order," he said absently.

George glanced at the pig Jedi. "Clay?"

Techno snorted. "Y'know, for someone who's got a lot of friends, you don't seem to remember any of them except for Dream. No, this came from Sapnap. You know how he got his scars? Yeah, well, he got to keep the kid's lightsaber as reparation. He polished it up and told me to give it to you. Said it might come in handy."

George made a mental note to take Nick out to dinner as a "thank you."

"Turn it on, George," Philza said gently. "See what you think."

George took a couple of steps away from the two Jedi, then activated the lightsaber. The blade



exploded to life in vibrant blue, and immediately, energy flooded George's body. He felt stronger, faster, more focused. He swung the lightsaber experimentally, and the hum of the blade sparked something deep in his chest.

*This is how I used to feel, George realized. Back when I could really connect to the Force. How did I ever forget this feeling?*

“I think that solves his problem,” Techno muttered.

George finally pried his eyes off of the lightsaber and turned his attention back to the two Jedi. “I can train with this?” he asked, a little more gleefully than he'd meant to.

Philza grinned. “With that reaction? Yes, absolutely.”

The lightsaber seemed to glow in George's hand. He swung it a few more times, and at its perfect response, he jogged to the center of the arena. Gods, it felt like he was flying. “Can I try sparring again?” he called. “I want to see if I still remember how to fight with a lightsaber.”

Philza and Techno glanced at each other. The pig Jedi scoffed, but he wore a small smile.

“I'll get out of your way,” Techno said, and he headed for the ramp that led out of the arena. “Have fun beating him up, Phil.”

Once Philza turned to face him, the energy in George's blood picked up the pace. Instead of feeling dizzy or sick, he felt alive. Was this really all it took to make him feel better? Switching from his staff to a lightsaber?

“Ready, George?” Philza called. The Jedi Master stood passively, but his hand rested on the hilt of his lightsaber.

His lightsaber hummed with power, and George grinned wildly. “I'm ready.”

## Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading! If you feel so inclined, please drop a comment to let me know what you thought! :)

Now, for my schedule update: You'll now be seeing me on Fridays and Sundays. That seems to be when I get the most interaction from y'all, and, quite frankly, I'm a selfish person lol. I want to make sure that you don't miss an update!

As always, thank you all so much for your continued support! I'll see you on Sunday!

## Once for Honor, Twice for Valor, Part 2

### Chapter Notes

Happy Sunday, everyone! Here is the last update of the week! Like Friday, this one is a little bit shorter than usual, but I really, really loved writing it.

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Tubbo crept along the line of shrubbery that ran parallel to the hallway. It wasn't a comfortable place to be, but it kept him out of view from Master Bad, who stood directly in front of the task force's headquarters. Tubbo loved Bad dearly, but he needed his favorite teacher to move. Tubbo had to get in!

Suddenly, Skeppy ran up to Bad. The shorter man began shouting about something, to which Bad held out his hands placatingly. Tubbo stifled a frustrated groan. Knowing Skeppy and Bad, they wouldn't finish their conversation for some time. Tubbo's chances of getting in through the front door were ruined.

Tubbo looked around, annoyed. Then his eyes landed on some nearby staggered rooftops, and an idea bloomed. His next best bet would be to get on top of a building. Maybe from up there, he could see another door or window that would provide him access.

After confirming that yes, Skeppy and Bad were still talking, Tubbo took off across the courtyard. In four smooth jumps, Tubbo landed on top of the tallest building. He flattened himself against the parapet, calmed his breathing, then peered over the edge. He could clearly see the front door, as well as the other side of the building. No windows... no other doors...

Tubbo frowned. Where else could he sneak in?

Suddenly, his connection to Dream flared with emotion. Tubbo stifled a gasp of surprise, and he frantically cast his mind around, his heart racing in his ears. To his relief, Dream's Force presence was still solidly in his quarters. Maybe Dream had just read something funny.

Tubbo heaved a relieved breath, but it didn't last long. As soon as his heartbeat calmed down, a pang of guilt hit him like a punch to the stomach. Tubbo felt bad, sneaking around the Temple without telling Dream. Of course, his Master didn't know of the antics he got into with Tommy, but that was different. Dream had never told Tubbo *not* to go have fun with his best friend. (And, speaking of the blond boy, Tubbo should have *at least* brought him along!)

*Listen, Tubbo, I know you're curious. I love that about you. But I don't want to talk about my mask or my scars. You just have to be okay with that.*

Skeppy and Bad's argument finally came to a close, and the two of them started off towards the infirmary. This was it! He had an opening! Tubbo clambered to his feet, but then, doubt shot through his heart, freezing him in place.

He shouldn't be sneaking into the task force headquarters. He should be at Dream's quarters,

asking his Master what was going on. For all of Dream's secretive tendencies, he'd never treated Tubbo like a kid. In fact, he'd always pushed Tubbo to the best he could be, to reach as high as he could and beyond. By doing this, Tubbo was stabbing him in the back.

*He won't even tell me who George is,* part of Tubbo thought bitterly.

*And if he doesn't tell me, it's not my right to know!* the other part of him argued back.

For a long moment, Tubbo just stood on top of the building. His body screamed for him to rush to the front doors of the task force headquarters before someone else showed up, but his heart kept him rooted to the spot.

“There's actually no point in trying to get in there. It requires a handprint and a biometric scan. And you're right, there are no other doors or windows. Cho-Nal picked a secure spot, for once.”

Tubbo yelped and whirled around. Dream leaned against a chimney, arms crossed and a faint smile dancing on his face.

“How'd you do that?” Tubbo gasped. His heart was pounding as fast as a drummer's solo. “You were just- no, I felt you. You were just in your room. You were, right?”

Dream chuckled. “Maybe, maybe not,” the Jedi Master said absently.

Tubbo smiled weakly at the familiar air of mystery, but it faded as soon as Dream took a step towards him. Holy Kantos, he'd just been caught red-handed. Dream wasn't strict by any means, but he didn't appreciate being directly disobeyed. Tubbo swallowed his pride and steeled his nerves. He'd brought this upon himself.

But Dream didn't raise his voice. He didn't even touch Tubbo. He just walked straight to the parapet and leaned against it.

“I've made a lot of mistakes, Tubbo,” Dream said softly. His tone was one that Tubbo had only heard a couple of times before. “I'm not a very good role model. A lot of people will tell you I am, but I'm not. I'm barely even a good Jedi. I've tried to teach you everything I know, and sometimes, I think I even failed at that.” Dream paused, and he gave Tubbo a sad smile. “But you're turning out better than me. That's all that matters, really.”

Tubbo didn't know where on earth Dream's introspection was coming from. But it sounded uncomfortably like the thoughts that Tubbo had heard from Dream when they'd first become Master and Padawan. *Self-loathing. Guilt. Anguish.*

“You're not a bad Master,” Tubbo said hesitantly. “I've learned a lot from you.”

Dream's smile was painfully cynical. “You were just about to sneak into the building that houses a classified task force, Tubbo. I think that means I failed as your Master somewhere along the line.”

Tubbo knew that Dream wasn't blaming him, but guilt and regret still sprung to life in his chest. He'd known that sneaking into the task force headquarters wasn't right, but he'd wanted to do it anyway. And for what? To learn something that Dream himself might not even know yet? To learn something, *anything*, about Dream's past, even though it was clearly painful for him?

What kind of padawan did that make Tubbo?

“Follow me,” Dream said abruptly, swinging one leg over the parapet. “I want to show you something.”

Tubbo immediately obliged. He followed Dream back into the courtyard, through several long hallways, and around the back of the Temple. Tubbo felt nerves clog his throat. He'd never been behind the Jedi Temple before. The shadows had always seemed too ancient and powerful, however stupid that sounded. Tubbo longed to walk just a little closer to Dream's side, but he kept his distance. He'd broken Dream's trust. He couldn't go running back to his Master now.

Suddenly, Dream rounded a bend, and Tubbo faced a wall with handholds and footholds carved into the stones. Tubbo stared for a moment, astonished. Then Dream launched himself upwards, using naught but the carved notches to balance himself, and Tubbo's amazement increased tenfold.

"Come on, Tubbo," Dream called. "Use your hands to guide your feet."

Tubbo swallowed anxiously. "Are you sure I can do this? That looks... really dangerous."

Dream chuckled. "You made the full training course, Tubbo. You can jump up one wall. Follow the handholds, and you'll be fine."

Tubbo didn't think he would "be fine," but he had to try. He took a shaky breath, then jumped at the first handhold. To Tubbo's surprise, the rough stone provided a sturdy grip. He glanced at the next handhold, exhaled, and threw himself at it. Again, the crude cut of the handhold gave him a solid grip. After those first two jumps, Tubbo found that it was easier than he'd thought to scale the gigantic wall.

He got so confident that he completely undershot the last jump. One second, Tubbo was reaching for the edge of the rooftop. The next, he was flying back towards the ground. Tubbo didn't even have time to panic.

Someone grabbed his arm, and Tubbo jerked to a stop.

"Nice job," Dream said, grinning slightly. "Don't worry about that last jump. Honestly, I think I messed up the distance when I carved these."

"All due respect, Master, but you're insane," Tubbo gasped. With Dream's help, he pulled himself onto the rooftop and collapsed in a heap. Now that he was out of immediate danger, blood roared in his ears, and adrenaline made his fingers jitter.

"No time to rest, Tubbo," Dream said cheerfully. The blond man was already walking away like nothing unusual had happened. "We're almost there."

"Almost where?" Tubbo called, still out of breath. He got no reply, and he got to his feet with a groan, hurrying after his Master. "Where are we going?" he repeated, once he'd caught up to Dream.

Dream glanced over his shoulder. "The Hideout," he said simply.

Tubbo frowned. "The what? I thought there was nothing up here."

"You, and most of the Temple."

On a good day, Tubbo could barely keep up with Dream's chaotic mind. On a bad day, Tubbo barely understood five total words that came out of Dream's mouth. Now, it seemed that he had to add a third category in which he was completely and utterly lost.

After a silent minute of walking, Dream and Tubbo rounded a chimney and arrived at a huge ledge that jutted out from the side of the Temple. It was so large, Tubbo wasn't sure how he'd ever

missed it.

“Has this always been here?” he asked blankly.

Dream chuckled. “Has been since I was a kid.”

Dream stepped onto the ledge and waved for Tubbo to join him. Tubbo did, following Dream's cue and taking a seat. *This is a beautiful view*, Tubbo thought, through his haze of anxiety. *I wish I'd known about this place before. It would be great to study up here.*

Silence hung between them. As much as Tubbo wanted to say something (anything to break this awful silence), he kept his mouth shut. Dream had never taken him up here before, never shown him the handholds in the back wall. Something important was about to happen. So Tubbo bit his tongue and let Dream speak first.

Finally, *finally*, Dream sighed. He removed his mask and set it aside, bright eyes narrowing against the sunlight. As always, the sight of Dream's scars made Tubbo's chest ache.

“I got these a couple of months before I met you,” Dream murmured.

Tubbo's heart stopped.

“It was only a couple of months,” Dream continued, and a sad smile crossed his face. “I, uh... I went down into the Underworld and tried to stop a gang that had been moving their resources up here. It was just a couple of levels down, but I went by myself. I didn't take any backup; I didn't even tell anyone that I was going down there. I'd gotten away with other dangerous missions, so I thought, 'yeah, I can do this.'”

Dream chuckled bitterly, and pain flooded their bond.

“Obviously, I couldn't. Walked away alive, but I brought these with me. That's why I got the mask. I thought it was better to be faceless than for everyone to see the mistakes I'd made.”

Dream took a deep breath and turned, looking Tubbo straight on. Tubbo flinched. Dream seldom looked him in the eyes when his mask was off.

“When I met you, the wounds had just barely healed,” the blond man said softly. “That's why I didn't want to tell you anything. Everything was still so fresh, and I didn't want to ruin a good kid like you by telling you what I'd done. I didn't want you to know I was just as confused and lost as you were. Over the years, it got easier to never explain. That wasn't fair to you. I'm sorry.”

“It's alright,” Tubbo said in a small voice. Dream chuckled again, a fond smile touching his face. Tubbo's insides warmed with joy.

“See, I don't deserve that kind of respect,” Dream murmured. “Thank you, Tubbo. I think you saved my life.”

Tubbo blinked. “I did? Wasn't... wasn't it really hard for you to teach me?”

“I mean, sometimes, sure. I was a broken 19-year-old, trying to teach a 14-year-old who'd lost his previous Master. It's hard not to be nervous.”

Tubbo considered that for a moment. He'd never really thought of it that way. When his first Master had been badly injured and retired from being an active Jedi, Tubbo hadn't much cared. The two of them had never been close. Master Rosel hadn't really appreciated his curious spirit and...

questionable hobbies. In truth, Tubbo had expected to keep being passed around to Master until he finally finished his training. But now, after being taught by Dream... Tubbo couldn't imagine having anyone else as a Master.

He'd never realized that it would be hard for Dream to teach a padawan that had already had a Master.

"I think you did a good job," Tubbo said softly. "You've helped me a lot, Master. I'm glad I helped you, too. I didn't realize I was."

Dream shook his head a little. "I didn't, either."

They were silent for another long moment, and Tubbo was grateful for a chance to think. There was so much to think about. He had more questions he desperately wanted the answers to, but he was terrified that Dream would close up again.

Suddenly, Dream let out a quiet breath. "What do you know about George?"

Tubbo's heartbeat picked up. Despite his excitement, he chose his next words very carefully. "He's an exiled padawan," he said slowly. "Got exiled about four years ago. He's really, really powerful. No one knows exactly why he was exiled, but there's a lot of speculation outside the Temple that he killed someone. I- I don't think that's true, though. Um... I know that you know him. And it seems like most of your friends are his friends, too, so maybe you were friends before he left?"

Dream inclined his head. "I'm proud of you, Tubbo," he chuckled. "You put a lot of the pieces together."

"Thank you." *I don't feel anything but guilty for it.*

"You're mostly right. George and I were friends before he was exiled. Me, him, and Sapnap were super close, like, tight as family. Kind of like you and Tommy."

Dream's shoulders slumped, as if the next part of his story physically exhausted him. Tubbo put a gentle hand on his Master's shoulder and waited. Now that Tubbo was actually hearing Dream's story, it didn't make him as happy as he'd thought it would. It just made him sad.

"George did kill people," Dream admitted quietly. "A lot of people, actually. That's why he was exiled. But he had to make a choice that would have killed people no matter what he did. Sapnap wasn't with him. I wasn't with him. The blame falls on the two of us, too."

*George killed people? Tubbo thought frantically. Then why is he here? Why are we trying so hard to protect him?*

"No, that's not the point," Dream chided. He gently flicked Tubbo's chest, and Tubbo realized that he'd been thinking a little too loudly. "George isn't a cold-blooded murderer, Tubbo. If I killed someone to protect you, would you be scared of me? Would you want the Temple to exile me because technically, I killed someone?"

Tubbo knew the answer without a second of thought. "No," he murmured. "No, of course not."

Dream lifted a shoulder. "Well, that's what George did. But the Council likes its technicalities. 'Jedi aren't supposed to kill people in times of peace,' all of that. So, they exiled him. And I..." Anguish radiated off of Dream like a broken heater. "I thought he deserved to go. I had a lot of issues, Tubbo. I still do. But I'm getting better, and I'm lucky to have gotten a second chance with George. I'm sorry that my nightmares kept you up, and I'm sorry for how my mistakes have impacted your

training.”

Tubbo thought over the many nightmares he'd witnessed, and suddenly, they fit together like pieces of a puzzle. “So you haven't seen George in four years?” he asked. “When he showed up again, that's the first time you've seen him since he was exiled?”

Dream grimaced. “Yeah.”

“And that's why you were so...”

“Yeah.”

“But things are better now?”

“Yeah.” For the first time since they'd sat down, a genuine smile spread over Dream's face. “Things are better than they've been for a long time.”

If nothing else, the joyful smile on Dream's face was enough to make Tubbo glad that George had come back to the Temple. But, before they finished their conversation, Tubbo had to ask one question that had been nagging at him like a thorn.

“Do you have a Force bond with George?”

Dream blinked, clearly startled. “No,” he said slowly. “Why do you think I would?”

Tubbo flushed. Well, shit. “I heard a lot of your thoughts about him,” he mumbled. “They all seemed really strong. And you have really similar auras, but maybe that's just because you're both really powerful. And sometimes, you look at him like...” Dream's face was blank, and Tubbo stumbled to a stop. “N-never mind. It was stupid.”

For a long, long moment, Dream looked at him bemusedly. Tubbo wished he could melt into the Temple and hibernate for a couple of years. Finally, Dream burst out laughing.

“Tubbo, most Jedi don't have connections like that,” the blond man said, once he calmed down enough to talk. “Force bonds are only for Masters and Padawans and sometimes for Jedi that work together. Like, Philza and Techno, they have a Force bond. It keeps them safe when they're on missions together. It's not a romantic thing.”

Tubbo fixed his eyes on the ledge and refused to look up. His cheeks were absolutely burning. Gods, he'd been so sure. He'd been so sure that there was *something* there, something that neither of the two men never ever talked about.

“Hey, don't look so embarrassed,” Dream chuckled. “You're not- it's not a big deal. Just don't go asking George the same thing, alright? I don't think he wants to know that my padawan thinks we're bonded or something.”

“I won't,” Tubbo mumbled, and he continued his efforts to sink into the Temple.

But luckily, Dream didn't push the issue. The blond man grabbed his mask and carefully slotted it back over his face. After seeing Dream's face during such an emotional moment, the white mask felt jarring. Tubbo completely understood why Dream wore it, but still. He liked to see his Master's eyes light up when he laughed or the deep pride on his face when Tubbo did something well. It made Tubbo feel warm inside, too.

“I know that wasn't a perfect explanation or anything,” Dream said, getting to his feet. Tubbo

scrambled to get up as well. “And I'm sure I didn't make a lot of sense. But you can ask me more questions, alright? I promise that I won't keep things like that from you again.”

Tubbo beamed. “Yeah, I will. Thank you for telling me this much. I'm... I'm kind of honored, really.”

Dream ruffled Tubbo's hair with a quiet chuckle. “Don't mention it. This was long overdue.”

Dream stepped off of the ledge, and Tubbo knew that the conversation was over. More likely than not, Dream had some important task force things to do (which Tubbo would absolutely ask about later since he'd been given permission to ask questions). But before he followed his Master, Tubbo took one last look at the view.

The Jedi Temple really was beautiful.

“Master?” Tubbo called. Dream paused, glancing at Tubbo over his shoulder. “Since you showed me how to get up here, can I hang out here? And maybe bring Tommy with me? It's really nice up here.”

Dream's loud laughter was the only response Tubbo got. But the joyful sound was well worth it.

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Wilbur rubbed his eyes in an attempt to make the holopad come back into focus. When he put his glasses back on, nothing had changed. The holopad before him was still as fuzzy as a weak transmission. Wilbur groaned and rested his forehead against the table.

How long had he been working? Wilbur wasn't sure anymore. He knew that he'd had breakfast (a lukewarm bowl of oatmeal that currently sounded like a delicacy), but he might have skipped lunch. He definitely needed to have dinner – and make sure that Tommy hadn't accidentally blown up the Temple.

Wilbur double-tapped the corner of his holopad. 12:05 blinked back at him. Wilbur frowned, and his exhausted brain worked overtime to compute the numbers. Did that mean that it was midnight? Gods, he'd completely skipped dinner. He needed to stop working and eat something.

With a couple of taps, Wilbur closed the files he'd been looking at and turned off his holopad. But before he could get up, the doors to the room hissed open. The noise was absolutely cacophonous in the near silence.

“Fucking hell!” Wilbur shouted. He squinted against the sudden light, and he silently cursed the inventor of all automatic lights. “Close the fucking doors!”

The doors closed, and Wilbur heaved a relieved sigh. Dark spots blotted most of his vision.

“Gods, Wilbur. You look terrible.”

It took Wilbur a couple of seconds to recognize the voice and match it to the person standing before his desk. Once the dark spots finally cleared from Wilbur's eyes, he found that George was staring at him with a worried gaze. “George?” he asked blearily. “What are you doing up? It's midnight.”

“No, Will, it's not,” the shorter man said slowly. “It's noon. Have you been up all night?”

Noon? What did noon mean? It was a combination of the words “no” and “on,” so it had to relate



to those words. “No going on?” “No lights are on?”

Then Wilbur remembered what “noon” was, and he briefly wondered if he'd lost his fucking mind.

“I guess I was,” Wilbur muttered. He tried to give George an apologetic look, but it was difficult to do so when looking up at the shorter man made Wilbur feel nauseous. “I don't think I ate. Or slept. I might have taken a nap, but I don't really remember.”

George sighed heavily, and Wilbur could hear the worry in his friend's voice. What was the big deal? It wasn't like Wilbur was about to pass out or anything. He'd just spent a couple too many hours reading through files. After all, Techno and Philza deserved a couple days' break, so Wilbur was more than happy to pick up the slack. He was perfectly fine.

Then Wilbur blinked, and he realized that his desk was free of ripped up papers and empty folders. “How'd I do that?” he asked, confused.

Someone on the other side of the room snorted. Wilbur panicked for just a moment before he remembered that George was with him. “You just passed out for 15 minutes, Wilbur,” the engineer called. “I cleaned up your desk. As soon as I grab some files, I'm getting you out of here. It's a miracle you lasted this long.”

“I'm *fine*,” Wilbur protested. He tried to stand, but the room spun, driving him back into the chair. “Oh... maybe not.”

“You're not fine at all.” George suddenly materialized at Wilbur's side and hoisted him to his feet. Wilbur didn't even have time to wonder how the hell George had moved so quickly before nausea set in again. “No wonder Tommy was so worried about you.”

That cut through Wilbur's haze of sickness. “Tommy was worried about me?” he repeated. He could barely form the words, but he still spoke with as much mockery as he could. “Uh-huh, that's *totally* what happened. My padawan; worried about me. Hah! As if Tommy even noticed that I was gone.”

Something sharp dug into Wilbur's arm, and he yelped at the pinch.

“Of course he was worried, you fucking idiot,” George muttered. “Do you really think that Tommy hates you? Or somehow just doesn't notice when you're gone? You've missed, like, two days of training. If you'd stayed in here much longer, Tommy probably would have broken in to make sure you were still alive.”

“Or just for the information,” Wilbur grumbled.

Despite his scowl, Wilbur's heart was pounding with horror. Had he really missed two full days? Was Tommy okay? Hopefully, Bad had paired him with someone else for training hours. And, even more hopefully, Tubbo had kept an eye out for him.

They reached the doors, and the pneumatic panels lifted to grant them exit. Wilbur hissed as sunlight assaulted his eyes once again.

“You're not dying,” George huffed. “Gods, I can't believe you did that to yourself. I remembered you being obsessive when we were kids, but now, you're just psychotic. You need to get some sleep. And some help.”

Wilbur wanted to protest, but his tongue wasn't really working. And his eyelids were so, so heavy. When had that happened?

“Alright, walk that way. You’ll be fine.”

Wilbur was shoved forward, and he took a couple of stumbling steps. He couldn't see anymore, so he desperately hoped that he wouldn't run into anyone. Maybe he should take off his glasses. Wilbur tried to raise a hand to take off his glasses, but his arms wouldn't obey him. Neither would his legs. Oh, gods, he'd made such a mistake by working all night.

An arm suddenly slid under Wilbur's shoulders and guided him forward. Wilbur slumped against his guide, relieved. Thank the gods. Hopefully, this person knew where his room was.

“And you call me unhealthy. This is a little taste of your own medicine, if I do say so myself.”

Wilbur frowned at the chipper voice that assaulted his ears. “Tommy?” he slurred.

“Yeah, yeah, it's me, Will. Holy Kantos, you are in *really* bad shape. I mean, I knew it would be bad, but you are just a fucking mess. Without me, you'd be walking into the walls right now. I'd bet you can't even see me.”

Despite his rambling, an undercurrent of worry cut away the edge in Tommy's words. A strange tug pulled at Wilbur's heart. Had Tommy waited for him outside the task force room?

“No, I wasn't waiting for you. Don't be silly.”

He had.

“Thank you,” Wilbur mumbled. “I can't... I can't really see right now.”

Tommy was silent for a long moment. Then, very quietly: “I know you can't. I'm surprised you can even hear me. I'm getting you back to your room, okay? I'll let you sleep for a couple of hours, then I'll bring you some dinner. I think sleep is more important than food.”

Wilbur's exhausted brain couldn't really process the sentences that Tommy had strung together, but he understood the gist: Tommy was taking care of him.

“I'm fine, Tommy,” Wilbur slurred. His voice was almost entirely gone. “I'm perfectly fine...”

In the end, Wilbur was asleep on Tommy's shoulder before they'd even made it halfway to his quarters. Tommy basically hauled him to his bed and flopped him onto the pillows. Wilbur didn't wake up through any of it. He only stirred again when Tommy returned with dinner, almost six hours later. The last thing Wilbur would remember would be Tommy meeting him and George outside the task force room.

If Wilbur had been awake, he would have seen Tommy pause before leaving Wilbur's quarters. He would have seen Tommy's anxious frown, and he would have heard the padawan's quiet murmur.

“Sleep well, Master. Please take care of yourself while I'm gone. I'll be back, I promise.”

Then Tommy left, worry and fondness shining through their bond.

## Chapter End Notes

Confession: I only made this story so I could write some really wholesome Master &

Padawan interactions :'))))

Thank you so much for reading! If you are so inclined, please drop a comment to let me know what you thought! I'll see y'all next Friday with a very dramatic chapter that I think you'll really enjoy... I'm certainly excited about it!

Have a great week!

## Once for Honor, Twice for Valor, Part 3

### Chapter Notes

Hello, hello, everyone! I'm here with the first update of this weekend, and the second to last part of this arc! I absolutely adore this update, and I really hope that y'all have as much fun reading this as I did writing it!

(What's this? I'm back up to my 8k standard? Ah, yes, the universe has righted itself.)

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

When Phil finally stepped into his quarters after the planet's longest infirmary visit, he found five new messages waiting on his holopad. He scowled at the blinking light. Couldn't even have a minute to rest, could he?

"Holo, begin reading messages," Phil sighed, closing the door and heading for his bed.

*"First message. Sender, Eret."*

Phil frowned. He and Eret had been discussing Delphina's behavior (as Phil had been horrified to hear of what had transpired). But they'd recently agreed to stop messaging in case someone like Tubbo went poking through their communications.

"Skip message," Phil said. He'd read it later.

*"Second message. Sender, Rhodys."*

Rhodys was one of the foremost leaders of the task force. No doubt, they wanted to update Phil on new information they'd uncovered on Illumina.

"Skip message."

*"Third message. Sender, Bad."*

Phil paused in taking off his boots. That was unexpected. "Read," Phil called, standing from his bed and walked over to his holopad. It beeped twice, then began reading.

*"Philza, I saw you limping out of the infirmary. I would know, I'm still in here. If you don't go back and get that ankle looked at, I will personally drag you out of your quarters and perform a healing ritual on you. I know you don't want me to use any magic for the next couple of days."*

Phil chuckled gently. Of course, Bad would be worried about him. "Reply to Bad, I promise I will go back. Thank you for your concern."

The holopad hummed for a moment, then beeped brightly. *"Message sent,"* it chirped. *"Fourth message. Sender, Cho-Nal."*

That was more like it. Phil sighed heavily and sank into his desk chair. "Read message," he

muttered.

*“Philza, you are avoiding my calls. Answer me at your next convenience.”*

Phil glanced at his holocom machine. It pulsed a steady purple, which indicated missed calls. Phil sighed again and pressed his thumbs into his temples, trying to push away the headache that was quickly blooming. He still hadn't quite recovered from the fumes of the Underworld.

*“Fifth message. Sender, Cho-Nal.”* Before Phil could even issue an order, his holopad began reading. *“Since you refuse to speak to me, I will lay out the Council's requests. Due to your eager training of Engineer George, we request proof that it is justified. We do not wish to see a repeat of his last tutelage at this Temple. We agree to continue his training on the condition that he proves he has the maturity to use his skills wisely. In order to properly gauge his mental state, Engineer George must complete a series of trials tomorrow morning. I will send you a third message later this evening to confirm that you have spoken to him on this matter.”*

The holopad beeped happily and turned itself off. For a long moment, Phil sat dumbfounded as he stared at the small device.

What the absolute fuck was the Council thinking?

Anger swept through Phil like a storm, and he reached out, grabbing his holocom from the side table by his bed. With a couple of quick swipes, he had turned the device on and was calling Cho-Nal.

*“Yes?”* Cho-Nal's face appeared in a rush of blue pixels. His scowl immediately melted into a syrupy smile. *“Ah, Philza. I see you finally-”*

*“What the hell do you mean, George must complete a series of trials?”* Phil interrupted sharply. On most days, he showed Cho-Nal a modicum of respect. But Phil's lungs hurt like a son of a bitch, and his patience was worn thin. *“He's not a padawan, Cho-Nal. You can't give him trials. It's not-”*

The image of George's terrified face flashed through Phil's mind. Whether it was from the night George had been exiled or from two days previous, when he'd shown up for his first training session, Phil didn't know. But the terror was the same. Trials would destroy all the progress that Phil had worked so hard to accomplish. Trials would set George back to where he'd been before – scared of himself and scared of the Jedi.

*“Oh, no, Philza, you misunderstand our intentions.”* Cho-Nal narrowed two of his eyes. *“You would understand if you'd returned my calls. No, the Council doesn't wish to give Engineer George Jedi trials. That would be... improper. We simply wish to test his boundaries. We want him to fight his peers.”*

In Phil's exhausted, med-addled state, it took him several seconds to compute the flowery words that dripped from Cho-Nal's mouth. Finally, it clicked, and Phil murmured, *“You're pitting him against his friends?”*

Cho-Nal smiled imperiously. *“Exactly! Knights Sappan and Skeppy need a good challenge in their lives! And for someone like Technoblade... I'm sure George will be an easy victory.”*

Phil knew that he should be worried. But the only thing he felt was unbridled joy. George wouldn't like the idea of fighting his friends, but he could win in a landslide.

*“You seem happy, Philza.”*

“No, of course not,” Phil said hurriedly. If the Council knew that he liked their idea, they would immediately veto it and come up with something else. “I’m just happy to be back in my quarters. It’s been a long day.”

*“Hm. Well, it’s about to be a little longer. Given that you have been Engineer George’s... Master, in recent times, you have been delegated to tell him of his upcoming battles. They will begin at sunrise. George must be there on time.”*

Phil had no problem telling George the news, but Cho-Nal’s tone made him scowl. “And when did the meeting to decide all this take place?” he asked archly. “Did I somehow miss the memo?”

Cho-Nal was silent for a long moment. *“No. It occurred while you were in the Underworld with Technoblade. We didn’t think it concerned you.”*

In other words, Phil had been forcibly cut out of the loop. It didn’t come as a surprise, but that made it no less infuriating to hear from Cho-Nal’s thin, reptilian lips. Phil was even angrier that Cho-Nal hadn’t even bothered to come up with a good lie. The meeting couldn’t have happened while Phil was gone; Cho-Nal had explicitly mentioned that the Council was worried about *Phil* training George.

In a perfect world, Phil would have given the other Jedi Master a piece of his mind. Instead, he set his jaw and tightly bit out, “I’m part of the Council, Cho-Nal. I have the right to know about what happens in every meeting, not just the ones you *want* me to know about.”

Cho-Nal completely ignored Phil’s dig, which aggravated him further. *“Then you should also know that we are not obligated to tell you of a meeting’s proceedings,”* the other Master said primly. *“It is up to you to educate yourself. I suppose that is difficult, given that you are still recovering from your mission. Perhaps you should take a few days to rest, Philza?”*

“I am fine,” Phil ground out. “I will inform George of his engagement. Good day, Cho-Nal.”

The other Jedi Master’s smile was sickly sweet. *“Good day, Philza. Do get some rest; you look terrible.”*

Phil shut off the holocom and shouted profanities into his empty room. After he’d sufficiently exhausted his vocabulary, he glared at the holocom as if it could somehow transmit his anger. Why did Cho-Nal hate him so? Was it just because Phil liked people that the rest of the Council didn’t? Was it “improper” to be partners with Techno? To be friends with Wilbur and Dream; to help train their padawans? What had Phil done to invoke such ire?

Nothing, probably. The Council just didn’t like change, especially when that change involved a controversial ex-padawan. If Phil thought about it, he understood why the Council was wary of his fondness for George.

But that didn’t exempt them from being assholes.

Phil shook off his dour mood (which only exacerbated his headache) and snatched his earpiece off his desk. George only had about 14 hours before the fights, and he deserved to get as much time as he could to prepare. Since the engineer was living in the visitor rooms, Phil had to go tell him in person.

“Read urgent message; sender, Eret,” Phil ordered, popping his earpiece into his ear and striding out of his room.

*“Beginning audible translation,”* the earpiece responded pleasantly. It beeped, hummed, and began

reading. *“Philza, I received a message from a contact in the Underworld. They claim to have seen Delphina heading down past level 5000 a couple of days ago. They don't know where she was headed, but she had a lot of money on her. Clearly, that raises some questions. My contact isn't the most reliable, so I'm going to talk to Rhodys and see if we can send a team down there to search for some answers. I'd like to discuss potential candidates as soon as you're feeling up to it.”*

Phil rubbed his eyes. The whole situation with Delphina was an absolute mess. He'd had his suspicions about the slender woman for some time, but it seemed that things were much darker than he'd ever guessed.

“Reply to Eret, 'I'll be available tonight,’” Phil ordered. He swore as he tripped over his heavy feet and quickly instructed his earpiece to delete the choice phrases from his message. “I just got word from Cho-Nal that they're putting George through some bullshit fights tomorrow morning. I'm pretty sure they blocked me. Did you know about this?”

His earpiece hummed for a moment, then beeped. *“Message sent.”*

Phil sighed heavily and slipped his earpiece into one of his many pockets. The sun was just starting to illuminate the tips of the Temple's tallest spires. Most evenings, Phil would be out on his balcony, finishing up any last business before winding down for the night. Today, he wouldn't even get a chance to sit down.

At that moment, Phil's weak ankle twinged, and his lungs ached at his involuntary hiss of pain. It seemed he didn't get a chance to heal, either.

*I need a vacation*, Phil thought dryly. *A forest planet would be nice.*

Fantasies of luxurious locales kept Phil awake and aware for most of his journey across the Temple. About halfway to the visitor rooms, he got another welcome distraction. A presence lit up in Phil's mind, burning a familiar, warm red.

“Hello, Techno,” Phil said. He stepped to his right, and the pig Jedi immediately fell into place beside him. Phil didn't waste brainpower trying to figure out where Techno had materialized from. “What are you doing out of your room?”

“I'm enjoying the sights,” Techno drawled. His voice still carried a slight wheeze – the aftereffects of Underworld fumes. “I decided to get out of my comfortable bed and wander around the Temple. It just sounded like a great idea. You?”

“You'd never believe it, but me too. A walk around the Temple was just what I needed.”

“What a coincidence.”

A moment of silence. Then:

“Whose errands are you running now?”

Techno's voice was flat, frustration running a sharp undercurrent through his words. Phil had heard that tone more and more since he'd gotten elected to the Council.

“Cho-Nal, again,” Phil said brightly. Techno rolled his eyes, and Phil let his faked enthusiasm drop into apathy. “Yeah. The Council is making George fight his friends tomorrow morning to see if he's dangerous. I think you're going to be one of his opponents, Techno.”

The pig Jedi blinked. “They think George and I are friends?”

Phil chuckled darkly. The Council had most likely picked the most dangerous Jedi they knew of and thrown them all into a lineup. Phil just prayed that he and Dream weren't part of that cast.

"So, what are you-" Techno broke down into wet coughs, and Phil rested a hand on his partner's shoulder. "Sorry," Techno groaned. "What are you doing out here? Cho-Nal can wait until tomorrow; he's not that important. You're limping."

"He wanted me to personally tell George the big news," Phil said heavily. "And you're one to talk. Sounds like your lungs are made of coal."

"That's about how it feels."

They were a sorry sight. Two of the strongest Jedi in the Temple reduced to nothing more than coughing fits and limping. *We look pathetic*, Phil thought, and he allowed himself a jaded smile. *If Cho-Nal could see us right now, he'd probably be delighted. What a fucking sadist.*

Techno coughed again, and this time, he sounded genuinely ill. Phil ground to a halt, gently grabbing his partner's arm. "Techno, stop. You need to rest. I'll find George, tell him what's going on, and then go back to my room. Don't worry about me. I know that's why you're out here. Go get some sleep."

"I would," Techno muttered stubbornly. "But I don't really trust you to get back by yourself."

It was a rare show of affection from the pig Jedi. Phil smiled warmly, which earned him a defensive grumble and a slight frown.

"I'll be fine," Phil said, and he emphasized each word lightly. "Look, I'll make a deal with you. Do one thing for me, and then promise that you'll go get some rest. No detours, just straight to your bed."

Techno cocked an eyebrow. "Maybe. What is it?"

"Find George."

The pig Jedi cracked a small smile. "That's it?" he asked incredulously. "I don't even have to break the news; I just have to find him?"

Phil sighed. "Just do it, Techno. You're stronger than me."

Techno shrugged a little (because he was absolutely stronger, and they both knew it), then stared off into the distance. For a moment, he was silent. Then, slowly, he spoke again. "George is next to Dream. And Dream is in his room. They're both in Dream's room." Techno shook himself out of his focused state and gave Phil a curious look. "Isn't that a bad idea?"

The muscles in Phil's shoulders tightened before he could stop them. This was very, *very* dangerous ground. "Why would it be a bad idea?" he asked, as casually as he could. It was pointless to pretend since he was talking to Techno, but there was a chance that the pig Jedi would catch the hint and drop the subject.

"Phil, I'm not blind. I know what was going on between them. And now they're getting to know each other again, and that... isn't a great combination."

No such luck, then. Phil must have accidentally walked under a ladder.

"They're reasonable adults, Techno," Phil said. Techno muttered something under his breath,



which Phil steadfastly ignored. "I'm going to talk to George anyway, so things are going to be fine."

"Yeah, yeah," Techno grumbled.

The pig Jedi didn't move.

"And you agreed to go back to your room and rest?" Phil urged gently.

Techno's ears drooped, and he finally nodded. He reached for Phil's arm but stopped himself, clearly uncomfortable. Phil had only seen that mannerism a couple of times, but he knew it well. Phil could hear the words that Techno couldn't bring himself to say.

"I know, and I'm sorry that I'm pushing it," Phil said quietly. "I won't hurt myself. I promise."

Techno nodded again, more stiffly than the first time, but his shoulders slumped with evident relief. Finally, the pig Jedi turned and shambled down the hallway. As he walked away, coughs wracked his slim frame. Phil watched with a heavy heart, and he didn't turn until Techno was out of sight.

Phil had never seen Techno in such terrible shape. 5 days in the Underworld has nearly destroyed them, and their recoveries had taken a big chunk of Phil's confidence. How had they been so easily weakened?

Enough time for doubts later.

Phil shook his head to wake himself, barely stifling a groan at the pain that spiked in his temples. But he was alert again, and he strode for Dream's quarters with new purpose.

A couple of minutes later, Phil stood at the Jedi Knight's door with an aching ankle and the pounding behind his eyes at nearly unbearable strength. He knocked on the door, winced at the sound, and waited for a response.

"Just a second!"

True to his word, the door hissed open a second later and revealed the blond Jedi.

"Hey, Philza," Dream said cheerfully. "You could have just messaged me if you wanted to talk, you know. You didn't have to walk all the way over here."

Phil gave the younger man a weary smile. "Believe me, if I'd known, I would have just messaged. Can you call George over? I have to talk to him."

Dream's mouth curved into a frown. "Sure," he said slowly. The blond man leaned over his shoulder and shouted back into his quarters. "George! Yes, you have to get up! It's Philza. He wants to talk to you."

Something rustled, and a quiet voice let out a muffled "Shit!" Then George appeared in the doorway next to Dream.

"How the hell did you know I was here?" George demanded.

"Lucky guess," Phil said tiredly. "Listen, George, you have about fourteen hours to get ready. Tomorrow at sunrise, you have to go to the arena and fight your friends. The Council wants to know if you're a threat. I don't know how many people they've lined up against you, but I know

you're at least fighting Sappap, Skeppy, and Techno. That's really all I can tell you."

Dream and George both stared at Phil. He could only offer them a helpless shrug, and guilt clawed at his chest. He wished he could give them more information (or to do absolutely anything to dampen the blow), but he was as clueless as they were.

"You can't be serious," Dream said finally. The blond Jedi ran frustrated hands through his hair, and he stepped out into the hallway. Phil took a step back to give him room to pace. "That's insane! George can't fight us; that's not fair at all! When did this even happen? Philza, you're on the Council! Can't you stop this?"

"I'm not magic, Dream," Phil said archly. "I'm one man trying to stop ten other Jedi from doing whatever the fuck they want."

Dream winced, and somewhere in Phil's tired mind, he recognized that that had been a little harsh. But he didn't have time to be gentle. George needed every second he had left.

Phil turned to the engineer in question, who shied back from him. "George, I don't know what the Council expects from you," he admitted. "Or even if they expect anything. My only advice is to do your best. There's not much I can teach you about opening up again, to be honest. It's all up to you. Fight like you're on the same playing field as them, and you're going to surprise yourself."

George's eyes were wide with terror. In that moment, Phil realized that there was nothing he could do to help the former padawan. He turned back to Dream. "Help him," he said softly, quietly enough that George wouldn't hear. "Call whoever you have to, just... don't leave him alone tonight. He's going to need you."

Dream nodded slowly. Phil nodded back, then turned and strode away. It was an abrupt exit, but his headache was almost bad enough to make him pass out. He didn't want the two younger men to see that. They had their own problems to deal with.

Phil had just exited the hallway when he remembered his promise to Bad.

*I'm not going back to the infirmary tonight, he thought crassly. I need to sleep.*

On the other hand, his body also needed healing.

Phil heaved a truly exhausted sigh. Then, slowly and painfully, he turned on his heel and headed for the infirmary. Maybe the nurses would take pity on him and give him a straight bacta spray.

From somewhere across the Temple, relief and warmth suddenly flooded Phil's bond with Techno. A slight smile touched his lips. That was enough to make going to the infirmary worth it. Gods knew that he and Techno needed all the peace of mind they could get.

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As soon as Clay stepped back inside his quarters and the door closed, George basically collapsed.

"Whoa!" Clay barely managed to catch the shorter man before he hit the ground. George sagged against Clay like nothing more than dead weight, and Clay frowned, worry pin-balling around his chest. "Okay, well, you can't lie down right here."

Clay hauled George back to the couch. As Clay went about carefully setting the shorter man onto the cushions, George barely stirred. Only when he was properly situated did he speak again.

“The Council hates me, don't they?”

“Yeah, probably,” Clay muttered, then winced at his bluntness.

“They just...” George flopped his hands vaguely. “They hate me. That's the only reason they'd make me fight fucking Technoblade. I'm not on his level! What the hell does Philza think I can do? My best won't even get me past Nick!”

Clay raised an eyebrow. “I mean, you're better than Sapnap. You can't-”

George sat bolt upright, coming nose to nose with Clay. Clay inhaled sharply and prayed that the engineer didn't lean any closer.

“I am not better than Nick,” George hissed, with a wild look in his eyes. “Have you seen me fight, Clay? Philza kicks my ass, and there's not a damn thing I can do about it!”

Well, that wasn't true. Clay had seen George fight (even though, by Philza's request, he wasn't have supposed to), and he knew that the engineer was a much better duelist than he gave himself credit for. George was exceptional under pressure and extremely adaptable. And, as Clay had witnessed earlier in the day, George still knew how to wield a lightsaber. That alone was enough to mark him as a formidable opponent.

“Alright, listen to me,” Clay said firmly. He gripped George's shoulders, forcing the engineer to look at him. “Stop panicking. Whenever you had an impossible mission, you took it step by step. I know that was years ago, but it worked. That's how you got through your mission to Okonen, remember? So, let's do that again right now. What's the first thing that'll help you get ready?”

For a moment, George just stared at him. Clay kept his gaze fixed on the shorter man's dark eyes and refused to let his thoughts wander anywhere else.

Finally, George took a shuddering breath, and the edge drained from his eyes. “Okay,” he said in a small voice. “Okay. First, I want to finish these reports. I won't get anything done if I'm worried about them. Then-”

Clay held up a finger. “One thing at a time.”

George rolled his eyes, but a fond smile touched his face. “Alright. One thing at a time. Where were we before Philza came and ruined my day?”

Clay relinquished George's shoulders and turned back to the mound of papers scattered across his coffee table. For the past two hours or so, they'd read through all the information the Archives had to offer about Illumina, Delphina, and Underworld weaponry. George was there to add an Underworld perspective, and Clay cross-referenced everything with Philza's, Techno's, and Tommy's reports. It was a shitload of information, and Clay's head already ached from keeping it all straight. But George wanted to finish their reports, so finish the reports they would.

“We were looking into Illumina's unconfirmed contacts,” Clay said, picking up a paper with Techno's cramped handwriting scrawled across it. “There's a few more possibilities that Techno found. What about this bounty hunter, Pete Zah? It says that he's part Hutt, but he doesn't look like it.”

George considered the name for a moment. “I heard about him in passing. He's more of the lone wolf type. Pete Zah was close to an Underworld boss, though. Gods, what was his name? Oh, Vikkstar! From what I heard, Vikkstar ran a lot of syndicates and made huge profits before he finally got caught and arrested. The Republic Detention Center could only keep him in for a couple

of months.”

“What does Vikkstar have to do with Illumina?” Clay asked blankly. He knew that George had a point, but he couldn't quite put the pieces together.

“Nothing, directly,” George mumbled, and his cheeks went a little pink. “But if Illumina knows Pete Zah, and Pete Zah knows Vikkstar, then maybe that's how Illumina distributed his weapons. Vikkstar would definitely have the influence and resources to pull off an attack on the Temple.”

Clay picked up his holopad and swiped through the map he'd been making. He added Pete Zah and Vikkstar as potential connections, then sighed heavily as he scanned the spiderweb of lines he'd created around Illumina.

“You said Vikkstar was motivated by money, right?” Clay asked. At George's nod and clarifying, “That's the general opinion,” Clay rubbed his eyes. “Then attacking us is pointless. It's costly and doesn't reap any rewards. He would have been better off attacking or kidnapping one of the royals in the upper sector. Vikkstar doesn't fit our motive. He doesn't have a personal vendetta against us.”

George's face creased with frustration, but he scratched an “X” next to Pete Zah's name.

And so they continued, going through Techno's list (to no avail), and a list of potential connections that Tubbo had compiled. George raised an eyebrow when Clay pulled out Tubbo's list, but Clay defended his padawan with, “He does his research. And besides, what other leads do we have?”

Within another half an hour, Clay and George had finally exhausted all of the leads they'd been given. They'd checked everything from the Council's suspicions (the ones they were willing to share, anyway) to Philza's ideas to the rumors that Antfrost had picked up during his last off-planet trip. It all led back to the same problem: no one had enough personal vendetta against the Jedi to launch such costly attacks.

Clay slumped back onto the couch. “Gods, that took so long,” he muttered. He tapped their final notes onto his holopad, which basically boiled down to “we don't know shit,” then threw the small device across the room. It landed safely on Clay's robes, but it relieved enough stress to keep him from ripping out his hair.

“How long did that take?” George mumbled.

“Three hours?” Clay offered darkly. “Look, I don't know, and I don't care. I'll send the stupid report later. What do you want to do now?”

George paused halfway through rubbing his eyes, and he gave Clay a blank look. He looked as brain dead as Clay felt. “What?”

“What's the next step? How do you wanna get ready for tomorrow?”

George made a noise like a puppy being kicked and flopped next to Clay. “Fuck, why'd you remind me?” the engineer groaned. “I don't even know. I guess I could train or something. I don't see what good it'll do, but it's better than just sitting here.”

George looked so despondent that Clay could feel it in his soul. Despite the invisible sandpaper that scratched his eyes, Clay launched himself to his feet and stuck out a hand to George. His enthusiasm surprised both of them, if George's startled look was anything to go by.

“Then let's go train,” Clay decided. “For as long as you need until you feel ready.”

“That's not how it works, Clay,” George protested.

The doubts swirling around the engineer's mind were obvious, so Clay leaned down and grabbed one of George's hands, tugging him to his feet. “I don't care! You said that training would help, so that's what we're doing!”

With a dramatic sigh, George let Clay pull him up. Clay gave the shorter man a bright grin, which earned him a faint smile in response.

“That's better,” Clay chuckled. “Alright, get your jacket. I'll grab my lightsaber, and we can get going. Do you have your lightsaber with you?”

“...no.”

The hesitant answer caught Clay's attention. He stopped searching around the couch for his absent lightsaber and gave George a curious look. The engineer immediately flushed.

“I mean, I do,” George continued awkwardly. He pulled back the hem of his shirt and revealed a gold and white lightsaber tucked into his waistband. “I just don't know if I should have it on me since it's technically Nick's. It just... it felt weird not to take it around with me. Like I used to do with my old lightsaber, y'know?”

Seeing the lightsaber up close flooded Clay with memories, and he swallowed as a few of the strongest ones pressed past his mental shields.

*“Clay, look! It's coming together!”*

*“Okay, okay, you won. Let me up.”*

*“Take it! The Council won't let me have it anyway! I'd rather you keep this fucking thing, so you never forget about me!”*

“I'm sure you can keep it with you,” Clay said roughly. He cleared his throat and turned away from George's confused but piercing gaze. “Come on. The sun is going to set soon.”

Within a couple of minutes, they were on their way to the arena. The two of them walked side by side, quietly watching the setting sun. Clay was still lost in his thoughts, and one particular thought kept wrapping itself around his mind. Crossing lightsabers with George again sounded like a dream come true. But it also felt way too personal. What if their training took a competitive turn? Could their fragile friendship handle that kind of intensity so soon?

Whether it could or not, they'd be fine. Clay would make sure of that, no matter what he had to do.

When the sun was barely visible above the Coruscant skyline, Clay and George finally stepped into the training arena. They made their way to one of the many benches scattered around and prepared themselves. Clay shed his robe, carefully folding it before placing it on the bench. George did the same with his jacket, and Clay let his eyes skim along the engineer's lean arms for just a moment before looking away.

“What do you want to work on?” Clay asked. He drew his lightsaber from his belt, and the green blade hummed to life in his hands.

“Close combat. I got good at maneuvering and predicting people's strikes 'cause of all the scraps I got into in the Underworld, but I'm still not used to using a lightsaber.”

Another lightsaber hummed to life, and Clay glanced over his shoulder. His heart caught in his throat.

George stood a couple of feet away, a breathtaking lightsaber glowing in his hands. His face turned a ghostly, ocean blue under the ethereal light, and his dark brown eyes reflected each hue of the lightsaber to magnificent effect.

*Did he always look that beautiful?* Clay thought absently, almost dizzy from awe. Then George looked at him, and Clay's bubble of bliss evaporated. He wasn't here for... that. He was here to help George.

Clay cleared his throat awkwardly and strode into the center of the arena. "Alright, I'm gonna start here," he called, avoiding George's direct gaze. "You're probably going to be fighting at opposite ends of the arena tomorrow, so just take this as a challenge."

From his place at the bench, George sighed. "You're better than me, Clay. I don't know how you expect this to go."

Clay scowled. "You have no idea if I'm better than you. Stop thinking like that."

"Clay, for Tibulta's sake, you've been training four years longer than I have. You're still using Djem So, right? Yeah, so, basically, I don't have a chance. I'm just warming up so I don't die tomorrow. I can't even match Philza. I don't exactly expect to win."

Clay's frustration for the whole situation finally hit its peak. Emotion cascaded through his mind, and for the first time since Clay had promised himself that he'd keep things professional, he snapped. He reached out a hand and Force-grabbed the front of George's shirt. Then Clay dragged George across the arena until they were face to face, the engineer spluttering in protest the whole way.

"George, you're not weak," Clay snapped, ignoring the shorter man's continued protests. "You are stronger than almost everyone else in this Temple, but you're keeping it all locked inside your head. Look, I'm not trivializing why you don't use the Force. I... I wouldn't either. But you heard Eret. He and Philza *both* think that you're destroying yourself. And I swear to every single god, I will make you use the Force if that's what'll save you."

Clay took a deep breath, his rant having taken most of his air. Guilt for his harsh tone immediately swept through him, but he maintained a steady gaze. George had to hear this. Clay *refused* to let his best friend destroy himself.

Eventually, George nodded.

"Okay," the engineer said softly. "I'll fight you, lightsaber and all. And... I'll try to win."

Clay nodded once. "Thank you."

He pushed George back to the edge of the arena, releasing his grip once the shorter man's boots hit the ground. George steadied himself, then lowered into a ready stance. The energy in the air shifted into an electric tide. Clay's veins lit up with the familiar adrenaline that came from sparring, and he readied his lightsaber, waiting for George to attack. This was a real practice match now.

George rushed.

Clay caught the shorter man's lightsaber and tossed it away, immediately swinging around for a hit of his own. George parried, then stepped forward, and Clay ducked to avoid a cramped blow.

*He's using Shii-Cho*, Clay thought, bewildered. Then George was advancing again, and he didn't have time to consider the odd choice of form.

Their duel continued with relative ease. George was much more agile than most opponents Clay faced, but he matched the shorter man's speed step for step. They spun around the arena, Clay holding back just enough to give George a chance to practice his technique and form.

But, to Clay's great frustration, George insisted on only fighting with Shii-Cho.

*That form is for younglings!* Clay mentally shouted as he easily avoided another of George's open sweeps. *Gods-damn you, I know you still know Ataru! I can see it in your slashes! Use it!*

Clay drove forward and crashed their lightsabers together, preventing George from making another wide swing. "Stop," he growled. He pressed harder, and George's eyes widened slightly. "I know it's hard to use something that you think is broken. But you're not broken, and your form isn't broken. Use the Force and do what I know you can do!"

For a moment, they just stared at each other, lightsabers locked.

Then George's eyes narrowed, and Clay felt more than saw the shorter man move. Clay stepped back and caught George's sudden strike from the right. Then George was gone again, and Clay found himself relying solely on instinct to predict the next strike. He swung in a circle, his lightsaber guided almost entirely by the Force. Flashes of blue and green light filled the arena. Clay's years of training was the only thing that allowed him to see George dashing around him.

The Force pulsed through the air. Some came from Clay's connection as it guided him through the hailstorm of blows being rained down upon him. But most of the power came from George, who leaped around Clay as if he was little more than water in an infinite ocean.

Clay grinned wildly. *That's more like it.*

After a couple more parries, Clay got back on the offensive and matched George blow for blow. The shorter man was undeniably quicker, but Clay's powerful strikes broke George's rhythm, keeping him from getting inside Clay's inner ring of defense.

They were perfectly matched; a rushing river and an ancient boulder battling for dominance.

Clay's focus narrowed down to nothing more than George. George, whose eyes were alight with fire; George, who moved as swiftly as a bird. Clay couldn't remember the last time he'd been so invested in a duel. Even his battles with Techno never seemed to be so intense.

The Force flowed around them, giving strength to Clay's tired arms and legs. He kept moving, kept striking, kept parrying. He was starting to notice patterns in George's attacks. There would be a sweep to the left, then a quick strike on the right.

The next time George brought his lightsaber down on Clay's head, Clay caught the blow and deflected it past him. George stumbled, and Clay pounced, shoving George away with a Force blast. The shorter man fell entirely off-balance. Clay snatched George's lightsaber away, then stepped forward and held his lightsaber to the side of George's neck.

"I think that means I win," Clay said, his words broken up by heavy pants.

They stared at each other. George's eyes were stormy from their duel, and his chest heaved in erratic bursts. Slowly, the edge faded from George's eyes. His frown softened into a broad grin, and suddenly, Clay was looking at a completely different person.

“That was incredible,” George breathed. “Oh, gods, I- I haven't felt that good in so long.”

The raw energy in the air became a brilliant, warm glow that filled Clay to the brim with joy. He dropped his lightsaber from its poised position and gave George a matching grin. “You liked that?” he prompted lightly, holding out George's lightsaber.

George accepted his lightsaber with a giddy laugh. “Yeah. I'd forgotten what fighting with the Force felt like.” George shot Clay a wild grin, and shivers skittered down Clay's spine. “Thank you for pushing me. It was even easier to use Ataru than I'd remembered.”

Clay chuckled. “Well, you're faster now. I'm not surprised.”

The two of them wandered back to their bench, grabbing their respective water bottles and taking hearty drafts. Clay glanced at George, a question about defense on the tip of his tongue.

It was a grave mistake.

George was still panting, one hand balanced on his hip. His dark eyes were alight with joy, and his lips were quirked in a self-satisfied smile. Even his hair seemed perfectly ruffled from their duel.

Clay swallowed thickly. *Shit.*

He'd known what Tubbo had really been asking when his padawan had asked about Force bonds. Tubbo had been asking if he and George were romantically involved. Clay had denied it the best he could, and he'd even gone out of his way to say that Force bonds weren't romantic.

Clay had been lying through his teeth. Four years and he still couldn't escape his gods-damned feelings. He couldn't escape the butterflies that flapped around his stomach when George gave him that warm smile or the heat that made it impossible to breathe when he saw George's lean form.

Clay couldn't escape *George*.

“Do you want to go again?”

“What?” Clay blurted, startled out of his thoughts.

George rolled his eyes and nudged Clay's arm. “Keep up, idiot,” he chuckled. “I asked if you wanted to go again. I really, really enjoyed that, and I need all the practice I can get.”

Clay smiled faintly. He was about to say, “yes, absolutely” (even though his heart couldn't handle another round that intense), but then, his eye was caught by movement at the arena's entrance. Clay's smile grew into a grin, and he jerked his chin at the two people entering the arena.

“Actually, you might wanna spar with them.”

George turned, and Sapnap and Skeppy let out identical cheers.

“What the hell are they doing here?” George muttered, but his huge grin betrayed him.

“I thought it'd be a good idea for you to duel the people you'll actually be fighting,” Clay whispered back. “So I messaged them before we left. I hope you don't mind the company.”

George shot Clay a deadpan look, but Sapnap spoke before the shorter man could say anything.

“Nice job getting your ass kicked, Georgie!” the Jedi Knight called brightly. He jogged up to them and slung an arm around George's shoulders. “Ew. You're sweaty. But, still, I'm proud of you! You



held your own against Dream for, like, two minutes!”

George scowled. “It was more than that, sapshit,” he snapped. Before Sapnap could get out a response, George turned to Skeppy and gave the younger man a beaming smile. “It’s good to see you again, Skeppy!”

Clay chuckled as Sapnap continued to splutter. After a couple of seconds, Sapnap visibly gave up and joined Clay.

“No respect for the man giving him a compliment,” Sapnap sighed with mock weariness.

Clay nodded sympathetically. “None at all.”

A small smile spread over Sapnap’s face as George laughed at something Skeppy said. “George did really well,” he murmured. “I’ve never seen someone hold their own against you like that. I mean, except for Technoblade.”

“I know,” Clay said softly. “I’m proud of him. That couldn’t have been easy.”

They continued watching George and Skeppy for a couple more seconds. Clay could feel the tension in the air, and he knew from experience that Sapnap was working up the courage to say something. After another beat, Sapnap turned to face Clay straight on.

“Look, I want to talk to you,” the younger man said. He sounded awkward, like each word pained him.

Clay turned as well. “Okay. What is it?”

Sapnap inhaled, then exhaled weakly. It took him two more breaths before he actually said anything. “I don’t want to make this any harder for George than it probably already is. This *thing* between us is not helping him, so... I’m sorry, dude. I’m sorry for... not being there when... you know.”

So they were finally talking about it. “It’s okay,” Clay said quietly. “We were both hurting, and-”

“It’s not okay,” Sapnap cut in sharply. He ran a frustrated hand through his hair, pulling at his bandana as he went. “George just got back, and he doesn’t give a shit about our names. He calls us Nick and Clay, but we’re so *formal* with each other. The first time you called me Nick since I got my public name was when you were fucking crying outside the Council chambers, and that’s-”

Sapnap cut himself off with a huff, and guilt weighed heavy in Clay’s chest. He’d wondered for a couple of years where he and Sapnap had gone so wrong. They’d been the closest of friends, and then... they weren’t. Clay had been so busy with his issues that he’d never stopped to see if Sapnap was okay.

“I’m sorry, Sapnap,” Clay said, and he immediately wished that he’d said those three little words sooner. “I know I fucked up, and a lot of that fell on you. You didn’t deserve it. I’m... I’m really sorry.”

Sapnap sighed heavily. “Yeah, well, I’m no saint either,” he muttered. “We both fucked up pretty bad. I’m sorry, too.” Sapnap held out a fist to Clay, not taking his eyes off of George and Skeppy. “No more of this bullshit, alright? I’m Nick, and you’re Clay, and we both have really stupid public names.”

Clay chuckled in spite of himself. “No more bullshit.”

He gave Sapnap- Nick- a fist bump, and the younger man glanced up at him. A matching grin spread over Nick's face, and just like that, the tension of the past couple of years was gone. Nick roughly shoulder-checked him, and Clay chuckled.

“You're so stupid.”

“We're idiots together, Clay.” Sapnap cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted at George and Skeppy. “Hey, guys! We're here to train! Stop gossiping, or I will come over there and beat your ass!”

A couple of minutes later, George and Nick were situated in the center of the arena. Clay and Skeppy stood off the side, as they were there to act as critics until it was their turn to spar.

“Start!” Skeppy bellowed.

George and Nick launched at each other, swinging their lightsabers with calculated power. Nick, like Clay, mostly practiced Djem So. So George's Ataru should be more than enough to outmaneuver Nick and win the duel.

...except George didn't use Ataru. After two strikes, he switched back to Shii-Cho.

Clay scowled, annoyed. George had just had a major breakthrough, and what was the first thing he did? Go back to what back he'd been doing before his breakthrough! Using Shii-Cho (a youngling's version of Shii-Cho at that), George was basically handing Nick a victory.

“Is George using Shii-Cho?” Skeppy asked, clearly confused.

“Yes, he is,” Clay muttered. He stepped into the arena and waved his arms. “Time out! George, what the hell are you doing?”

George turned towards Clay, and Clay was surprised to find pain written across the shorter man's face. “I can't do it,” George called, and panic tinged his voice.

All of Clay's frustration was replaced by concern. “Can't do what?”

“I can't use the Force! It's just-” George flapped his hands wildly, accidentally swinging his lightsaber around. Nick let out an indignant squawk and ducked under one of the unsupervised sweeps. “It's not there! When I was fighting you, it was there, and now it's gone! I can't- I don't-”

Panic drifted around George like a personal Force fog machine. Clay quickly stepped into the shorter man's personal space, brushing off the unfamiliar emotions and gripping George's shoulders.

“Hey, breathe,” Clay said gently. “You're overthinking this, okay? Calm down, and we'll figure this out. Breathe in. Hold it. Breathe out.”

George trembled underneath Clay's hands, but he inhaled and exhaled shakily. Clay nodded, and he soothingly rubbed George's arms. Slowly, George's breathing calmed. It was a simple meditation technique that Clay had taught Tubbo when his padawan got overwhelmed, and Clay was glad to see that it worked for George as well.

“Sorry,” George muttered, eventually. “For freaking out, I mean. I just feel empty. It's like the Force is just... gone.”

Clay chewed his lip. It was clear that George was suffering from a severe mental block, which was

completely understandable. He didn't want to fight George again because then, the shorter man wouldn't know how to tap into the Force by himself. But how else could he get George to open up?

Then, an idea struck.

"Close your eyes," Clay ordered.

George blinked. "What?"

"Close your eyes."

"Clay, I don't-"

"Just do it, George."

George closed his eyes with a reluctant huff. Clay chuckled to himself and gently rested his hands on George's shoulders again. The shorter man shifted, clearly uncomfortable, so Clay waited under George relaxed a little to say anything.

"I know you know how to feel me," Clay said quietly. George tensed, and Clay lightly rubbed the shorter man's shoulders. "You do it naturally, George, it's okay. Take a deep breath and reach out."

Out of the corner of Clay's eye, he vaguely saw Nick and Skeppy heading out of the arena. Clay silently thanked them before returned his attention to George. The shorter man inhaled deeply, then slumped forward. A moment later, a presence touched the edge of Clay's mental shields.

"There you go," Clay murmured. "You're using the Force, George. It's always there, remember? It's not some magical thing that you have to drag out. It's just... there."

The presence at Clay's shields pressed in a little closer, enough so that Clay could feel the hesitation amongst the jumble of other, foreign emotions. In a heartbeat, Clay made a decision. He lowered his shields and gently led George into his mind, careful to keep his darker thoughts tucked away. It felt like he was hugging the sun.

"That's it?" George said faintly. The engineer sounded like he was almost asleep.

"That's it. It's not hard."

Clay carefully guided George out of his mind, and he was distraught to find that it pained him to do so. He and George had only been together for a moment. He shouldn't feel so attached! Clay shook off the strange feeling of loss, then lifted his shields once again and opened his eyes. George's eyes were still closed, and his shoulders rose and fell with the cadence of someone at peace.

Clay sucked in a breath. He could see the oh-so-faint freckles on George's nose; see the detail of each eyelash.

Too close, too close-

George opened his eyes.

*Too close, too close-*

"Do you think you can fight Nick now?" Clay asked raggedly. He lifted up prayers to every god that he didn't sound as wrecked as he felt.

George hesitated just a moment before he nodded. "Yeah," the shorter man said quietly. "Yeah, I'm

ready.”

They stepped away from each other at the same time. Clay let out a silent sigh of relief as George gave him a grateful smile, then walked away. By some god's good grace, Clay had gotten away with that. *No more*, he told himself firmly. *That is never happening again*.

What was even “that”?

Clay didn't know. And, if he was honest, he didn't want to know.

“Nick, Skeppy, come back!” George shouted. “I'm ready!”

The two Jedi Knights immediately appeared at the mouth of the ramp.

“Finally!” Nick shouted back. “If you're done having your touchy-feely moment, I want to get on with this fight!”

Nick and George launched back into battle, and Clay took his place at the edge of the arena once again. Skeppy joined him a moment later, and for a long moment, they watched the fight wordlessly. Clay was relieved to see that George used Ataru. His form was shaky, but at least it wasn't Shii-Cho.

Finally, Skeppy broke the silence. “You alright, Dream?” he asked quietly.

Clay swallowed the longing that threatened to consume him. “Never better.”

## Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading! If you feel so inclined, please drop a comment to let me know what you thought! I always enjoy hearing from y'all! :D

I want to add a quick disclaimer here as well: I do incorporate some deep Star Wars Legends stuff in this story. Most of it is just there to enhance the story and serves as little easter eggs for other people who love Star Wars as much I do! Don't worry if you stumble across something you don't understand (like the forms in this update). You're not missing out on any crucial plot points!

Sunday's update will be... quite the finale :)

# Once for Honor, Twice for Valor, Part 4

## Chapter Notes

Hello, everybody! Welcome to the 10k finale of this arc! I realized I was a little vague in the last update, so let me clear the air! This is not the finale to the entire story, just this arc! Trust me, y'all still have a wild ride in store before all of this is over :))))

Anyways! This is by far one of my favorite chapters so far, and I really hope that y'all enjoy it as much as I do!

Enjoy the finale of Once for Honor, Twice for Valor!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

George felt like throwing up.

Well, that wasn't entirely true. He was almost positive he would throw up. Sitting in one of the training rooms that branched off from the arena, George couldn't pretend that he might somehow get out of his battles. The sun just barely touched the horizon, and all of the Council waited outside (George knew, he'd looked out and seen them). The uncertainty of it all made it 100x worse. George still didn't know who he was fighting. For all he knew, he'd step out into the arena and immediately be pitted against Philza or one of the other masters.

George exhaled shakily and stood from the bench. Gods, he just wanted to get the first fight over with. After that, he'd have reasonable expectations. Right now, everything was one big question mark.

And there was his nausea again. Wonderful.

“Georgie, we're back!”

George yelped, startled, and whirled around with his lightsaber at the ready. It took him an embarrassingly long time to recognize the voice and register the words that had been shouted at him.

“Fucking finally,” he hissed, shoving his lightsaber back into his belt. Clay and Nick stepped into the room, both clearly hesitant after George's initial greeting. “Who's in the other room?”

Nick beamed. “Skeppy.”

Relief cascaded over George like a waterfall. “Oh, thank the gods,” he muttered. He sank back onto the bench and took a couple of deep breaths. Skeppy was a good fighter, but their sparring the previous night had proved that Skeppy's strengths did not lie in the art of lightsaber combat.

Unless he'd been sandbagging.

George looked up at his friends. “Anything else?” he asked, feeling significantly less confident.

“He's even more nervous than you,” Clay chuckled. “And he looks twice as sick.”

George scowled at the taller man, and Nick drove an elbow into Clay's side.

“Georgie looks fine,” Nick protested, giving Clay a mock glare. “Look at him! He's ready to go beat some ass! Clay, c'mon, you've got to be supportive here.”

Clay tipped his head a little, and George could only imagine that he was rolling his eyes. “Whatever, sapshit.”

Nick turned his glare on George. “I am never going to forgive you for starting that.”

It was enough of a distraction to help George breathe again. He huffed a laugh, and both his friends grinned at him. Something had happened between Clay and Nick. Their smiles were a little brighter, and they stood a little closer together. George had no idea what had transpired, but he was grateful for it. It had hurt to see his best friends so far apart.

*“The battle begins in two minutes.”*

*Oh, fuck, fuck, fuck-*

“Alright, we gotta leave,” Nick said, and a flash of nervousness crossed his face. “You're gonna do amazing, George. We'll see you after the fight.”

George nodded and buried his face in his hands. He didn't really trust himself to speak.

Footsteps receded down the hallway. George exhaled sharply into the empty room, and he lifted a prayer to every god that he knew of that he survived the day.

A hand suddenly landed on George's shoulder.

“Believe in yourself, okay?” a voice murmured into George's ear. “You're a damn good fighter, George.”

George's heart caught in his throat. Before he could look up (or even put a coherent thought together), Clay's hand left his shoulder, and footsteps tapped out the door. When George finally worked up the strength to take his head out of his hands, he was truly alone.

*This is it, he thought nervously. Now or never.*

George got to his feet, slipping out of his jacket and dumping it on the bench. A couple of seconds were devoted to swearing at his uncomfortable tunic before he finally twisted in just the right way that allowed him to grab his lightsaber.

Per the Council's “request,” George was wearing two-thirds of the full Jedi robes. By the grace of the gods, he'd only been required to wear an undertunic and an obi. Of course, George had taken the meager requirements and ran with it, opting for a short-sleeved tunic and the thinnest obi he could find. And, luckily for him, the pants and boots were almost identical to his everyday outfit.

But that didn't mean that George was happy with his somewhat bulky attire.

*“The battle begins in one minute. Please take your positions.”*

George stood before the door that led into the arena. 60 seconds and the door would open. 60 seconds until his first battle of the day.

Breathe in. Hold. Breathe out.

George ran his fingers over the smooth metal of his lightsaber, taking comfort in every ridge and imperfection.

*I can do this.*

The door opened.

He was greeted by utter silence. Before he completely lost his nerve, George stepped through the door.

Jedi lined the lip of the arena. They stood quietly, watching George as if he was a mouse about to face off against a bird of prey. George scowled up at all of them. *The Underworld was more welcoming than you sons of bitches. You should be ashamed of yourselves.*

But among the stoic faces, there were a few friendly ones. Clay and Nick stood directly to George's right, faces creased by worried smiles. Bad was on George's left, along with Antfrost, and they both waved when George looked at them. It wasn't much. But George didn't feel quite so alone.

George stopped in the white circle drawn onto the arena tiles. Across the arena, an identical white circle sat empty, waiting for his first opponent.

It was just Skeppy. George could fight Skeppy.

*"Knight Skeppy, you may enter the arena."*

George's limbs threatened to give out as a door across the arena opened, and Skeppy stepped into the sunlight. The younger man looked as nervous as George felt, and his eyes darted around like a cornered rabbit's. Really, George didn't blame him. In all the practice fights they'd had the previous day, George had won in a landslide.

*You can do this*, George told himself. *You did this yesterday. You can do it again.* His mental pep talk had nowhere near the effect that Clay's provided, but it was all George had left to depend on.

Warmth tingled in his fingertips. This was it.

*"Knight Skeppy, are you ready?"*

"Yes, Master!" Skeppy shouted. He drew his lightsaber, and immediately, the white circle around his feet burned the same blue as his lightsaber. *So that's what it does*, George thought absently.

*"Engineer George, are you ready?"*

"Just George is fine, Master Cho-Nal," George shouted in the general direction of the Council's booth. "I doubt anyone in the Underworld would come to my shop after all this."

What did George have left to lose, really?

*"Begin!"*

George took a deep breath and lowered himself into a ready stance. He drew his lightsaber, turning it on and sweeping it in front of him in one fluid motion. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed that the circle around his feet also turned blue.

Skeppy didn't move. The Jedi Knight just watched George warily, shifting from foot to foot.

Alright. George would make the first move.

He rushed. Skeppy immediately reeled back, blocking George's first swing like he'd known it was coming. Soresu was a damn pain to fight.

George recoiled and tried again, lunging at all the weak points he'd picked out the previous night. Sidestep, short jab. Deflected. Other side, wide slash. Also deflected. George scowled. So Skeppy *had* been sandbagging. George understood since it was only common sense to keep some aces up one's sleeve, but, really?

Skeppy suddenly lashed out with a tight slash. George spun away from the blow, balanced himself, and launched back in. The energy of his turn brought him all in the way into Skeppy's inner circle. He drove a Force push into the Jedi Knight's stomach, then aimed a scything downward slash at the younger man's exposed lightsaber.

But his strike never connected. Skeppy was falling, and then he was back on his feet, dragging his lightsaber out of harm's way and coming back for another shot. George ground his teeth. Gods, he hated Soresu.

George caught the blow and shoved it past him. Skeppy stumbled but immediately recovered, breaking George's return stroke. It seemed that George couldn't put the Knight off-balance as easily as he had in their practice matches. Okay, new strategy. If he couldn't outmaneuver Skeppy, then he had to overpower him.

The Force pounded in George's veins. He inhaled deeply, then set it free. It flowed like lava through his body, lighting up every nerve and making him feel like he was a miniature sun. Whispers of greatness roared in his ears like a siren's dying song.

George resolutely set his jaw against the temptations and leveled his lightsaber at Skeppy. The younger man was fast, but he wasn't strong – time to exploit that.

One step, a jump to the right, and a flip over Skeppy's head. George landed and swung. Skeppy caught it, swaying under the blow. George changed position, and once again, he was deflected. But Skeppy's arms were visibly shaking. Just a couple more...

George flew around the Jedi Knight, pushing his legs to the absolute max as he lashed out with blow after blow. Each landed, and each rebuttal became weaker and weaker.

Finally, Skeppy's arms gave way.

The Jedi Knight stumbled back from George's powerful overhead. George pressed in, snatched Skeppy's lightsaber from his hand, and shoved the younger man to the ground. Skeppy toppled over with a quiet wheeze.

George looked up at the Council's booth, where he'd seen 10 of the 12 Jedi sitting before the match started. Cho-Nal met his gaze. George narrowed his eyes. *I swear to the gods, if you make me put my lightsaber to his neck, I will break both of your knees.*

After a painfully long pause, Cho-Nal inclined his head.

*“Engineer George has won the battle.”*

George allowed himself a short huff of relief. Then he held out a hand to Skeppy and hauled the panting Knight back to his feet. “Nice round,” he murmured, holding out the younger man's lightsaber. “I'd say you were holding back a little last night.”

Skeppy gave him a sheepish grin as he accepted his weapon. “I just didn't want to be completely



humiliated. I'm sorry.”

“It's okay. Trust me, I get it. Cheer for me during the rest of these?”

“Of course I will. Good luck, George.”

George patted the younger man's shoulder, and they both turned away. George squared his shoulders and held his chin high as he left the arena. He'd won. The Council could think whatever they want, but now, everyone knew that George could hold his own against a recognized Jedi Knight.

That was something that he could be damn proud of.

As soon as the door to the training room closed behind him, George collapsed on the bench. Oh, fuck, he felt so sick. Now that the adrenaline was wearing off, George felt much less invincible and much dizzier. It was like someone had spun him around a thousand times, then told him to go throw darts.

*I don't know how many of these I can take, George thought weakly. I'll be completely exhausted by the third battle if this happens every time.*

The other door suddenly flew open, and two Jedi came bounding into the room.

“You fucking crushed it!” Nick shouted.

“Yes! Hell, yes!” Clay bellowed at the same time.

The two men hauled George to his feet and crushed him in a double-sided bear hug before he could even figure out what was going on. Once George's mind caught up, he laughed and hugged his friends back. They squeezed him tightly, still shouting encouragement.

“Thank you,” George chuckled tiredly once they finally released him. “I'm amazed I made it through that.”

“Of course you did!” Nick was basically vibrating with excitement. “It fucking sucks that Skeppy wasn't actually fighting last night, but hey, you still got him! I can't believe you moved fast enough to break his guard!”

George frowned, confused. “No, actually, I-” Philza's advice from the previous night suddenly drifted through George's mind, and he trailed off. “You know what? I'll wait until after we fight. I'm sorry, Nick, but-”

“Hey, no hard feelings,” the younger man chuckled. He slapped George's shoulder with a mischievous grin. “Alright, Georgie, you have half an hour until your next fight. Clay and I are gonna get you some snacks. You can't fight on an empty stomach.”

George's stomach growled in agreement.

“Just stay right there,” Clay ordered. He squeezed George's arm, and a big grin spread across his face. “You were amazing. Just relax, and we'll be back with food, okay?”

George's heart glowed with joy from both of his friends' praise. “I will,” he promised. “I won't even leave this bench.”

Clay and Nick both nodded, pleased, then turned and hurried out of the training room. They

knocked elbows the whole way, and their quiet bickering was audible until the door shut behind them. George chuckled to himself, then laid down on the bench. He wouldn't have even made it through that first fight without his friends.

George swallowed thickly. Gods knew how many more were coming his way. He wasn't anywhere near out of the Sarlacc pit yet.

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Antfrost winced as Skeppy was finally knocked to the ground. The Jedi Knight's head tipped back in visible exhaustion. Though George's shoulders rose and fell, the engineer barely looked winded. *Props to Underworld conditioning*, Antfrost thought mildly.

"Do you think that was a little rough?"

Antfrost glanced at his companion. Bad's eyes were fixed on Skeppy, mouth pulled in a worried frown.

"Skeppy is fine, Bad," Antfrost said reassuringly, though he couldn't help a quiet chuckle. "He's done worse to himself just by being clumsy. George didn't even hit him."

"I mean, sure," Bad admitted. "But that was still so rough. George *knows* how easily Zac bruises."

"I don't think bruises are really on George's mind right now, Bad."

In the arena, George hauled Skeppy to his feet, and the two exchanged some quiet words. Antfrost nodded approvingly. He'd never known George to be a disrespectful winner, and it warmed his heart to see that that part of the engineer hadn't changed.

"I'm gonna go see if Zac's okay," Bad muttered. He stepped away from the arena and headed towards the southern training room.

Antfrost smiled fondly but made no move to follow. Bad would be back in a couple of minutes when Skeppy inevitably shooed him away with, "*Yes, Bad, I'm fine, I promise. George knocked me around a little, but nothing is broken.*"

Antfrost glanced back down into the arena. George was slowly heading for his training room, and Cho-Nal's shout of "*Engineer George has won the battle,*" still echoed through the crowd. *Keep it up, George*, Antfrost thought eagerly. *You can do this. Just a couple more fights, and you'll have proved these bastards wrong again.*

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When Clay stepped back into the room alone, George's heart sank. "It's Nick, isn't it?" he asked heavily.

Clay let out a sharp breath. "Yeah. Skeppy is over there with him right now. I don't think he's giving Nick any tips, though, so you have nothing to worry about."

"Nothing to worry about," his ass. George had done nothing but worry since Nick and Clay had brought him a veritable buffet, then left again to figure out who he was fighting next. George had managed to choke down a couple pieces of fruit and some sort of weird meal bar, but he couldn't stomach anything heavier. Not with another battle coming up.

"You think I can beat Nick?" George asked quietly, glancing up at Clay.

“Yes.” The response was instantaneous.

“And you’re not just saying that?”

Clay sighed and sat next to George. “I’m not just saying that,” the taller man promised. “George, you outmaneuvered Skeppy’s Soresu. That’s a hell of a testament to what you can do.”

“It was just Soresu,” George mumbled peevishly.

It wasn’t that George didn’t want to take the compliment; it was that he didn’t want to take the compliment and then immediately get his ass kicked. That wasn’t very conducive to good self-esteem.

*“The battle begins in two minutes.”*

“Here we go again,” George said nervously. He got to his feet, and suddenly, a ludicrous idea occurred to him. “If I make it through all of these battles, I’m going to buy myself dinner. That’s gonna be my reward.”

Clay chuckled and clapped George on the back. “Allow me,” he said lightly. “I’m going to take you out to dinner after this, so you actually eat and don’t just pass out.”

“Damn,” George sighed. “There goes my evening plans.”

*“The battle begins in one minute. Please take your positions.”*

“I gotta go,” Clay muttered. He gave George a tight side hug, then headed for the door. Just before he left, the taller man paused and threw George a crooked smile. “By the way, you look still great in Jedi robes. Just thought you should know.”

Then he was gone. George stared after his best friend with a strange tightness in his chest.

*What the fuck was that about?*

The door to the arena opened, and George emptied his mind of all thoughts except *Fight*. He strode onto the cobblestone, once again ignoring the deafening silence and settling himself into his circle.

*“Knight Sapnap, you may enter the arena.”*

Nick sauntered in as if he’d been training for their battle since the day he was born. George scowled at the theatrics. Then he noticed that Nick’s smile was a little too big, and the younger man’s knuckles were white on the handle of his lightsaber. Nick was just as nervous as George. He just didn’t want to show it.

*“Knight Sapnap, are you ready?”*

“Yes, Master!” Nick bellowed.

*“En- George, are you ready?”*

Was Cho-Nal actually honoring his wishes and not calling him “Engineer George?”

“Yes, Master!” George shouted. The words tasted bitter on his tongue, but it was a small price to pay for Cho-Nal not adding “engineer” to his name like it was an insult.

*“Begin!”*

Nick activated his lightsaber, and the circle around his feet turned a bright amber. *Oh, I get it, George thought absently. They match the colors of our lightsabers. That's actually kind of cool.*

It was the wrong time to get distracted.

Nick moved in a flash, flying across the arena and bringing his lightsaber down in a vicious sweep. George stumbled, off-balance from his hasty block. Nick swung again, and this time, George couldn't escape the deadly blade. It scythed through his right arm, cutting a neat little chunk out of his exposed wrist.

Fury bloomed in George's belly.

*No!* he mentally shouted. *I will not fight angry!*

George gathered all of his pent-up rage and pressed it all into the power roiling in his chest. The Force took everything without a moment's hesitation, and suddenly, George found his head blessedly clear. He spared a moment to be thankful before focusing all of his attention on Nick.

The younger man wasn't as quick as Skeppy. Each time George ducked or shuffled to avoid a blow, Nick's brow creased in frustration. Clearly, he couldn't keep up. George could use that.

George strung together a series of rapid taps, striking Nick across his body. The younger man blocked each one, but his next swing was rougher, rawer. Nick didn't have the control to use Djem So's extreme power in moderation.

It was ironic, really. Fighting Clay, with his version of Djem So, then fighting Nick, who practiced Djem So in a completely different way, felt like fighting two sides to the same coin.

Only, this side was one that George could beat.

Their next couple of hits were evenly matched. Nick kept George at arm's length, and some of his more powerful blows broke George's rhythm. But George moved faster, swung lower. It was only a matter of time until one of them slipped up.

Blue and amber swung in deadly unison. They knew each other better than George and Skeppy did, and each of their blows was calculated to strike at each other's weaknesses.

*Hold on, just hold on.*

Nick carved a small piece out of George's right forearm.

*Come on.*

George swung a quick overhead and locked their lightsabers together. Nick immediately shoved George to gain room for a strike, and George finally went on the offensive. He slipped his lightsaber out of the lock, then backflipped away, using sheer kinetic energy to propel him. Then his boots hit the ground, and he launched forward.

That switch clicked once again, and George's body hummed with power.

George's lightsaber sang a vicious melody as it cut through the air. He picked up the tempo, leaping around Nick and landing Force blast after Force blast on the younger man's back and shoulders. Each time, Nick couldn't move fast enough to defend himself.

Finally, Nick whirled around with a frustrated growl.

George ducked under the swing, dashed forward, and rammed the heel of his hand into Nick's solar plexus. The younger man let out a pained wheeze and toppled to the ground. George snatched Nick's lightsaber from his limp grasp as the Jedi Knight fell.

*"George has won the battle."*

Now that he'd stopped moving, George hurt even more than he had after the first battle. But he set aside his aching muscles and walked to Nick's side, sticking out a hand.

"I fucking hate you," Nick groaned. He accepted George's hand and pulled himself to his feet. "Like, seriously, that's the note you end on? Do you even know how much this hurts?"

"Obviously," George drawled. "I've been jabbed there once or twice before."

"You're insane. I'm never speaking to you again." After a couple more seconds of dramatic wheezing, Nick finally calmed down, and he shot George a proud smile. "That was really good, George. I'm glad you beat me."

Warmth flooded George's chest. "You're a good opponent, Nick," he murmured back. "I'll see you in a bit."

"You know it."

George turned and headed for his training room. This time, he didn't walk with his shoulders back or his chin up. He wasn't here to prove anything anymore. The Council might be watching him, but ultimately, these were his friends. Beating them didn't mean anything if George didn't learn from every fight.

From Skeppy, he'd learned that every defense had an exploitable weak point. From Nick, he'd learned that anger and competitiveness clouded his judgment to an unreasonable degree.

Who would have known that George would get so many life lessons out of Council-mandated scuffles?

George entered the training room and immediately received an armful of lanky Jedi.

"George! Oh my gods, I'm so fucking proud of you! That was awesome!"

It took George a couple of seconds to balance himself and the person in his arms. Once he finally did (and recognized the waves of blond hair), George beamed.

"Thank you," he giggled. He squeezed Clay tightly, which earned him a breathless laugh from the taller man. "I cannot believe I actually won! Clay, I won!"

Clay pulled back and gave George a brilliant grin. "You did!" he crowed. "You beat Nick, and you get to hold that over his head for the rest of his life!"

"That's not really why I'm happy, but sure, that too!"

The two of them broke down in hysterical giggles. George's body was running absolutely haywire from so many conflicting emotions, and if Clay's pitchy laughter was anything to go by, watching the battles were no less stressful.

"Okay, I need to sit down," George said, once he'd calmed down enough to speak normally. His legs screamed in simultaneous relief and agony as he sank onto the bench. "Gods, I'm gonna need a

vacation after this.”

Clay sat next to him with a slight laugh. “How about we take care of your arms first?”

“My what?”

“Your arms, George. They’re bleeding.”

George glanced at his arms, and suddenly, he remembered that Nick had landed a few physical hits on him. His left and right wrists were both dripping blood.

“Oh,” George said blankly. “Right.”

Clay shook his head and grabbed a first aid kit from under the bench. How Clay had known it was there, George didn’t know. But he wasn’t going to question it since now that he was aware he was bleeding, his wrists were starting to burn.

“Nick should have been more careful,” Clay muttered. His mouth had twisted into a frown, but his hands were gentle on George’s wrist. “If he’d gone any deeper, you probably would have passed out from blood loss or something.”

“I think that’s being a little dramatic,” George said archly. “He was just caught up in the fight. It’s not like I didn’t sing off a hair or two.”

“That’s just hair, George. These are fucking wounds.”

Clay pressed a bandage to one of George’s cuts, and he hissed in pain. Clay’s hands immediately stilled. “No, no, it’s okay,” George said hurriedly. “It just... stings. I’m not used to treating wounds like this. I usually just... kind of let them heal.”

Clay nodded once and didn’t say a word.

The rest of George’s treatment passed in silence. It wasn’t uncomfortable, exactly. But they were both wired from George’s last battle, and Clay no doubt shared George’s nerves for the next one. There was just no time to breathe.

Finally, Clay snipped off the excess and released George’s wrists from his gentle grip. George gave the taller man’s work an appreciative once-over. The bandages were perfectly even.

“We’re matching,” George chuckled.

The corners of Clay’s mouth twitched. “I hope not. Please, never get scars like mine.”

George froze. He turned to face the other man, careful not to stare at the bandages that wrapped around Clay’s shoulders, arms, and wrists. Now that George thought about it, he’d never seen the blond Jedi without the bandages.

“That’s all scars?” George asked softly.

Clay’s smile took on a sad touch. “Yeah. Same thing as my mask. I made some mistakes, and I didn’t want to put them on display. Still don’t.”

It was a subject that George longed to press. But it wasn’t the right time or place, so he simply nodded and said, “I have some nasty scars, too. We should trade war stories sometime.”

And then, they moved on. Clay started digging through the many snacks that were still left and

offering George the ones that caught his eye. After much convincing, George finally accepted a shiny piece of plastic wrap that Clay claimed was an energy bar. What the hell, right? It wasn't like he could feel any worse than he already did. If anything, a bit of energy would help him.

Yes. It would help him in his upcoming battles.

Fuck.

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Tommy winced as George dealt a vicious overhead and locked his lightsaber with Sapnap's. "Holy Kantos, he is an animal," he muttered. "I didn't expect him to be this good."

"Mhm." Wilbur's gaze didn't leave the battle below them, and his dark eyes followed each movement that the two men made. "You'd be surprised at what George can do. He's probably surprising himself right now, too."

"If he's such a good duelist, why doesn't the Council want him training again?"

"Tommy, shush. I'm trying to watch."

The two of them were situated on the northern side of the arena, tucked behind a low ridge. Tommy didn't like it because a) it was a shitty view, and b) he couldn't find Tubbo anywhere. But Wilbur was still weak, so he wanted an immediate exit path, should he need it. Plus, Wilbur had always been averse to watching battles with other people. It was one of the few things that Tommy completely understood about his Master. Most of the other Jedi tittered like cucks when they were watching a fight.

"Stop being rude," Wilbur muttered absently, eyes still fixed on the fight.

Tommy tore his gaze away from Sapnap and George and stared at his Master. Tommy knew he could be arrogant, but he *never* let his shields slip. They were basically impenetrable. How the fuck had-

"I'm with you most hours of the day, Tommy. Don't be so surprised that I don't have to read your mind to know what you're thinking."

"I'm not thinking anything," Tommy muttered, which just got him a derisive snort from his Master.

Even though Tommy was kind of bored, the fights were still engaging. George seemed to be an excellent showman, so there was never a dull moment. Or maybe George was just desperately trying to win, and Tommy was taking enjoyment whenever he could find it. Either way, it wasn't a terrible way to spend a morning.

Then George suddenly sped across the arena, moving faster than a laser. Tommy blinked, and by then, George was gone again, leaping around Sapnap more quickly than Tommy could track.

"Will," Tommy hissed. "Is that Ataru?"

"Mhm. You've seen Philza fight, Tommy; you know what it looks like. Don't call me Will."

"Well, sure, I've seen it-"

George suddenly back-flipped over Sapnap's head, and Tommy paused to stare at the spectacle. Then he remembered why he was defending himself, and he continued.

"I've just never seen any other Jedi Master that relies so heavily on Ataru. Master Philza is like, the only one, and he's basically a category of Jedi all by himself."

"What are the other categories?" Wilbur prompted, with the barest hint of a laugh.

Tommy scowled and folded his arms.

After George's sudden show of Ataru mastery ("Not mastery," Wilbur had corrected when Tommy had made a comment), the battle was over fairly quickly. Once Cho-Nal's call of "*George has won the battle*" sounded around the arena, Wilbur stepped into the shadows. Tommy followed his cue, and for a moment, they just stood there. Then:

"Do you think he can beat everyone, Tommy?"

"Uh... do you actually want my opinion? Or is this one of these fucking rhetorical questions where you get mad at me when I say something?"

Wilbur sighed heavily. "I'm asking for your opinion."

Tommy considered everything that he'd seen in the past two fights. "No," he said slowly. "George is pretty damn good, but Master Philza and Technoblade would definitely beat him. Dream probably would, too, if the Council makes them fight."

Wilbur's dark eyes were laced with concern. "I think so, too," he muttered. "I don't know what George is going to do when he doesn't win."

"You think something is going to happen?"

"Honestly, Tommy? I don't know what the outcome of these fucking fights is going to be."

Tommy glanced back into the arena. George and Sapnap said something to each other, then walked in opposite directions. Neither of them looked angry, just a little tired. The idea of a much bigger fight blowing up in the arena made Tommy's stomach ripple, and he swallowed his fear.

"Should we leave?" Tommy asked quietly.

Wilbur glanced at him. "No. Not yet. I want to see how this ends."

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"I'm fighting Eret?" George hissed.

Nick put his hands up in front of him. "He walked into the room when I was leaving," he said defensively. "I dunno, maybe he was just checking on me."

George slumped forward. "I'm fucked," he muttered. "I'm so fucked. What am I even supposed to do?"

Clay and Nick were both silent. George appreciated the honesty, but the angry butterflies in his stomach only flapped harder, making him feel sick. Maybe he shouldn't have eaten anything else besides the fruit he'd crammed down after his fight with Skeppy.

"Alright," George mumbled. He pushed himself to his feet and began stretching out his arms. "What form does Eret use? I don't think it's cheating if I know that beforehand."

Clay and Nick exchanged a quick look before Clay said, "Juyo."



George couldn't decide if he wanted to scream or sob. "Of course."

He was well and truly fucked. George had had a good run, and he was proud that he had gone against Skeppy and Nick and won. But against Eret, an actual Jedi Master and practitioner of Juyo? George might as well hand in his lightsaber and wish the Council a good day.

"Hey." Clay laid a gentle hand on George's shoulder, startling him out of his thoughts. "Don't give up before you even go out there. Fight like you expect to win. You've already proven yourself wrong today, right?"

George gave Clay an even look. "Do you think you could beat him?"

For a second, Clay hesitated. And that was all the answer George needed. He shrugged Clay's hand off his shoulder, and the taller man took an awkward step away from him.

"I'm going to go out there and fight him," George told Clay and Nick, as evenly as his trembling body would allow. "But if neither of you can tell me that you would beat him, then don't expect me to have a lot of confidence in myself."

*"The battle begins in two minutes."*

Clay and Nick left the room without another word. In a lonely way, George was glad for the silence. He felt guilty for running his friends out, but during most of his fights in the Underworld, he'd been alone. It felt more natural to face down certain defeat by himself.

George took a shuddering breath. He could feel the Force at the edges of his mind, waiting for his call. *I'm calling now*, George thought, and he opened himself up. A warm feeling spread through his belly, wrapping around his lungs before crawling up his neck and settling at the base of his skull. The warmth was still uncomfortable. But George was willing to deal with uncomfortable if it meant that he would win.

*"The battle begins in one minute. Please take your positions."*

George activated his lightsaber. The now-familiar buzz of energy calmed his racing heartbeat.

The door opened.

George didn't even spare the crowd of Jedi a glance. He just walked to his circle and planted his feet, watching as it turned blue. Then George fixed his gaze on the opposite side of the arena, narrowing his eyes at the other door. If he struck first, he might get lucky.

*"Master Eret, you may enter the arena."*

As soon as Eret stepped into the sunlight, George's heart sank all over again. *I'm so, so fucked.*

Eret looked like a true Jedi Master. He wore his full robes (minus the outer robes), and his hands were neatly tucked behind his back. His shoulders were straight, his gaze was passive, and his chin was level. This was a man who didn't expect to win immediately, but to learn and earn victory through his knowledge. This was a far more dangerous opponent than Skeppy or Nick.

George swallowed through the ball of dread clogging his throat. It was like fighting Philza all over again – any wrong move would be exploited and used to his defeat.

*"Master Eret, are you ready?"*

Eret inclined his head and drew his lightsaber. It burned a brilliant silver.

*“George, are you ready?”*

George didn't trust his voice, so he simply nodded as Eret had.

*“Begin!”*

From the first second of the fight, George knew he was outmatched. Eret moved with the grace of a bird of prey and the speed of a wild cat. George lifted his lightsaber just in time to catch Eret's first powerful swing. The sheer force behind it made George's arms shake.

George's body was entirely guided by instinct as he blocked and parried each of Eret's devastating blows. The Jedi Master's movements were erratic and rough, but the results were positively terrifying. Each swing would have meant defeat, had not George somehow blocked it. Eret's swings were chaotic, yes. But George knew there was a pattern he simply couldn't see.

*I have to move faster if I want to survive!*

George drew back from Eret's onslaught and threw himself into a tight roll. It gained him a couple of seconds of breathing room, which allowed him to land a few quick strikes. Eret deflected each as if they were no more than a youngling's grabbing hands.

*Holy fucking Kantos. I'm dead.*

George ran once again. He settled into a frantic, unorthodox rhythm, rolling and flipping around Eret in a desperate attempt to gain enough ground to land a blow. Each time, Eret was somehow already in the position George wanted, forcing George to never stop moving.

Parry. Dodge. Roll. Dodge. Strike- no, parry.

Finally, George made enough space to throw out an arm and shove Eret away. The Jedi Master recovered almost instantly, as George had expected. But for a single second, his left elbow dipped. It was a minuscule movement, barely visible amongst the jagged sequences.

But it was enough to create a wider opening.

How on earth would George get Eret off-balance again? Even with the Force pumping through his veins, George's body was starting to give out on him. Eret was smart, and he'd kept George from getting any chances to rest. He wouldn't last much longer.

Then Eret was attacking again, and George shifted back into defensive mode. Eret's silver lightsaber flashed through the air. It moved like a malicious snake, striking at George with vicious hisses. Left, then right, and then suddenly, Eret was behind him, and George had to tuck and roll.

Gods, George couldn't make it.

George dug his heels into the stones to stop his roll. Eret was advancing, but George had a couple of seconds to think. He couldn't beat Eret in a straight duel; that much was obvious. What was left? George didn't want to fight dirty, but he couldn't-

That damned silver lightsaber sliced through the air again, and George sprinted for the other end of the arena. As he did, his lightsaber almost slipped through his fingers. George tightened his grip with a hissed curse, but then, an idea struck.

It was possibly the worst plan that George had ever come up with. But it was all he had left.

George spun on his heel and planted his feet, aiming for Eret's right arm. Inhale, exhale. George threw his lightsaber. It sliced over Eret's right shoulder, and the Jedi Master snatched it out of the air.

There was the opening.

He started running as soon as his lightsaber left his hand. When Eret caught the spinning weapon, George jumped and crashed his boots into Eret's chest. The Jedi Master stumbled, and again, his left elbow dipped. George slammed his forearm into the crook of Eret's elbow, and the Jedi Master grunted in pain, his arm dropping further. George grabbed both lightsabers from Eret's hands and shoved one last time.

Eret dropped to his knees. George lifted both lightsabers and crossed them at Eret's throat.

For a long moment, they just stared at each other.

Then the corners of Eret's mouth twitched.

“Well done, George,” he murmured.

George's lungs felt like they were about to explode. But he swallowed his growing nausea and nodded once, giving Eret a weak smile. An amused grin cracked Eret's passive expression, and light danced in his eyes.

*“George has won the battle.”*

Cho-Nal sounded just as surprised as George felt. George glanced at Eret, who inclined his head slightly, then turned and hurried out of the arena as quickly as he could without seeming desperate.

As soon as he was away from everyone's eyes, George collapsed on the bench and let out a groan of pain. His arms and legs felt like two lead pipes, and they were shaking so badly that George could hardly move. He could barely breathe, and dark spots wove in and out of his vision, giving him a kaleidoscopic feeling.

When Clay and Nick entered the training room a minute later, howling and cheering, George couldn't even bring himself look to up.

*I can't keep this up.*

---

For a split second, Bad almost considered breaking the rules.

As he watched Eret chase George around like little more than a child and his toy, his magic responded to the protectiveness building in his heart. Bad's fingertips sparked, and though his hands were clasped behind his back, his magic wove itself into a rune of power.

*George is going to get hurt,* Bad thought worriedly, unaware that his thoughts were shaping his magic. *Oh, Tibulta, I wish I could do something...*

Bad didn't even notice his magic until a warm hand landed on top of his, breaking them apart. It was only then that Bad realized he had almost drawn a complete rune. Should it have been finished, George would have received a supernatural burst of power.

“You can't do that, Bad,” Skeppy muttered. “This is George's fight. You know that.”

Bad gave Skeppy a weak smile. “Sorry. I didn't realize I was... yeah, I know it's his fight.”

Skeppy nodded. “It's okay. This is hard to watch.”

Bad didn't say anything. Due to the bracelet that sat on George's wrist, he could feel the engineer's stress and panic like they were his own. Bad closed his eyes against the waves of despair and clamped his mouth shut.

He felt like he was going to cry if he didn't help.

Bad spent the rest of the battle with every muscle tight. He kept his hands locked behind his back, lest they create another rune without his bidding, but he itched to do something, *anything*, to help his dear friend.

When George finally won, tears leaked from the corners of Bad's eyes. He slipped away from the crowd, not even waiting to hear Cho-Nal's call of victory.

Once Bad was hidden inside the courtyard next to the arena, he broke down. Emotions exploded like land mines in his head, and Bad choked, chest on fire from everything George felt. He collapsed to the ground in hysterical sobs, clutching at his throat. In Tibulta's Name, *he couldn't breathe*.

*You can do this, George*, Bad thought desperately. *Please. I believe in you.*

Whether he was trying to reassure himself or the absent George, Bad didn't know.

It took Bad almost ten minutes to finally calm down. When he rejoined Antfrost and Skeppy, both gave him concerned looks, but neither said anything.

---

As it turned out, George wouldn't be able to keep the contents of his stomach down. His nerves and stress finally overpowered him halfway through the break, and George spent the rest of the 30 minutes lying on the bench, feeling ill. Nick rubbed small circles into his back, which helped a little. But George didn't feel like he could even get up, let alone fight.

So far, his opponents had gotten steadily more and more challenging. First Skeppy, then Nick, then Eret. Who was next? Philza? Dream?

Technoblade?

George let out a pathetic groan. Each of the three aforementioned Jedi was a master in their own right. Each of them would be an impossible opponent. Yes, George was stronger than he'd thought he was, and yes, he had done nothing but surprise himself.

But hidden talent couldn't measure up to years and years of hard work.

“What is it?”

George lifted his head at Nick's worried question. Clay had reentered the training room. He stood awkwardly in the doorway, mouth creased in a thin line. George's stomach flipped over, and he slowly pushed himself to all fours.

“Clay,” he croaked. “Who am I fighting next?” Clay opened his mouth, then closed it. George's

heart sank. "It's Technoblade, isn't it?"

Clay didn't respond.

"The Council is sick," Nick muttered, with considerable heat. He ran his hands over George's back again, which soothed George's ill-feeling a little. "They're absolutely fucking sick. George, look. There's no shame in losing this one, okay? Technoblade is crazy, and you're barely getting used to using a lightsaber again. Just do your best."

Clay dropped to George's side, and he gently gripped George's shoulders. "No, George, listen to me," he murmured. "You're strong enough to beat Techno. You can match me, and I can beat him. You can, too."

*"The battle begins in two minutes."*

Something in George's soul snapped. He shoved Clay's hands off of his shoulders, and he stood, suddenly furious. Even his nausea seemed to wane in the face of his anger.

"I'm not like you, Clay," he hissed. "I'm not the Jedi Order's golden boy or one of the youngest Masters in the Temple. I'm a fucking ex-Padawan-turned-engineer, and I'm being pitted against fucking Technoblade! People in the *Underworld* are scared of him! How the *hell* am I supposed to hold my own?"

Even with his mask on, it was clear that Clay was confused. "George—" he started.

But blood roared in George's ears, and every single shitty thing that he'd been forced to endure at the hands of the Council had brought him to his breaking point. "No!" George barked. "I'm not as good as you think I am! I'm exhausted, Clay! I just want this to be over with!"

"George, I—"

*"The battle begins in one minute. Please take your positions."*

*"Get out! Both of you!"*

George barely recognized his own voice. But he was stressed and worn-thin and completely, utterly terrified. He turned his back on his friends and stood before the arena door. A second later, Clay's and Nick's footsteps retreated down the hallway.

George took a gasping breath. Was it from anger or fear? He didn't know. But he knew that one way or another, this would be the last battle he fought. After this, his body wouldn't have anything left to give.

*I have to make this good.*

The door opened. Even in the silence of the arena, George swore he heard murmurs, whispers of private conversations drifting around him like ghosts. *I'm fading fast*, he thought desperately. *I don't have the stamina for this. C'mon, Cho-Nal, hurry up.*

*"Master Technoblade, you may enter the arena."*

Techno stepped into the sunlight. His crimson robes fluttered around him like waves of war-torn ground, and his pink hair whipped around behind him in a long ponytail. His face was completely passive.

Gods above. George really had to fight the Blade.

*“Master Technoblade, are you ready?”*

“Yeah.” Techno drew his lightsaber and activated it. The arena was bathed in blood-red light.

*“George, are you ready?”*

George didn't bother reacting. He knew just as well as Cho-Nal that this battle was happening whether he was ready or not.

*“Begin!”*

George charged. He poured all of his anger and rage into the Force and let the resulting energy consume him. If he was going down, then he was going to make it a damn good show.

The first couple of blows they traded were oddly simplistic. George swung as rapidly as the Force allowed him, and Techno blocked without a single retaliation. It was strange, George thought, especially since logically, he knew he was leaving himself open in so many places. But he didn't allow himself time to consider what was going on.

Then Techno moved.

The pig Jedi was nothing but a blur, and suddenly, George was frantically defending against a savage onslaught.

That was when he remembered. Technoblade was a Master in Vaapad.

*Oh, in Tibulta's Name*, George mentally sobbed. He scrambled backward, his catlike reactions being his only saving grace against Techno's brutal assault. *I gave him this power! Gods, I'm probably still giving him power! How do I- Can I defend-*

Techno's lightsaber was everywhere. Red light filled George's vision, slicing around him like omnipresent razor blades.

*What can I-*

A cut on the left, a slash on the right.

*Maybe-*

Dodge, parry. Each of Techno's blows felt like George was getting hit by a speeder.

*If-*

Techno's lightsaber sliced across George's right wrist, cutting away the bandages. If the pig Jedi had wanted, he could have cut George's hand clean off.

*He's holding back.*

Time slowed down as George realized the truth. *Technoblade is holding back. Not because he wants me to win, but because he's enjoying this fight. I can't beat him.*

For the first time since he'd stepped into the arena, George truly accepted that he couldn't win. There were no last vestiges of hope. There was no magical power he could draw from. George's body was exhausted, and it was his own fault. He'd let his victories against everyone else feed his

ego until he'd somehow convinced himself there was a chance of beating Techno.

There wasn't. Technoblade was simply a better duelist. The pig Jedi could have dominated him just as easily if George hadn't given him his negative energy when they'd first traded blows. Vaapad or not, Techno was a true master of lightsaber combat.

George let his breathing even out. He still defended against Techno's wickedly fast blows, but his heart rate slowed, and his hands stopped shaking.

He wasn't going to win. But he didn't want to lose angry.

George turned and vaulted off the wall of the arena (Techno had almost backed him up against it). As soon as his boots touched the floor, he moved again, dodging around Techno's inevitable slash. Another flip, another dodge.

George struck.

His swing was childish compared to Techno's harsh, cutting strikes, but it was good enough. It forced Techno back a step, and George drove a Force blast into the pig Jedi's stomach. Techno grunted, gathered himself, and lunged.

So that was it.

The Force blast hit George before he could even blink. He sailed through the air like a rag doll, and when his back hit the ground, George barely felt the impact. He just smiled at the sky, appreciating the wispy clouds that drifted overhead.

He'd lost to Technoblade. And he couldn't be happier about it.

*"Master Technoblade has won the battle."*

In an odd way, George appreciated that Cho-Nal didn't wait until Techno had George at death point to call the fight. Everyone knew that Techno had won. If George didn't know better, he would say that Cho-Nal was actually giving him a piece of respect.

"Hey. You okay?"

George blinked the last of the stars out of his eyes and found Technoblade standing over him. The pig Jedi didn't look worried, exactly, but the corners of his mouth were curved in a frown.

George smiled. "Never been better."

Techno held out a hand, and George hauled himself to his feet. Once he was back on his feet, George accepted his lightsaber with a grateful nod.

"You know, you're pretty good with that thing," Techno said absently, gesturing at the lightsaber. "I'd say keep it up, but I don't think the Council would like that."

George cracked a small grin. "The Council doesn't like me, anyway. I think it's fine."

A matching grin pulled at Techno's lips. "Fair enough."

They gave each other a brief nod, then turned and headed for their respective training rooms. For the first time, George gazed up at the Jedi that ringed the arena. He found Bad, Skeppy, and Antfrost, and he waved at them. All three gave identical howls of encouragement. He also picked out Wilbur and Tommy, who hovered in the shadows above his training room. Master and

Padawan both grinned at him.

Just before he exited the arena, George glanced over his shoulder. Philza stood just outside the Council's booth, wearing a warm smile. George inclined his head. *Thank you, Philza. I've never stopped learning from you.*

George left the arena and found Clay and Nick waiting for him. Both awkwardly shuffled their feet, clearly waiting to see what George's reaction to them would be. George tossed his lightsaber aside and wrapped his friends in a tight hug.

"I am so sorry," George laughed breathlessly. "I was such an idiot. I couldn't have made it this far without you two."

Nick was the first to respond. "You're damn right!" the younger man snapped. Then he hugged George back tightly with an ecstatic, "Dude, you did it! That was *so good!*"

Clay quickly followed suit, wrapping his arms around George. For a long moment, the three of them just stood there, sharing the victories. Then Clay pulled them apart, and he gently tugged George away from Nick.

"I'm really sorry for what I said," Clay said, and he smiled sheepishly. "I think I kind of projected onto you. I'm proud of you even though you lost, okay? In fact, I'm proud of you for just going out there. You did so fucking well, George."

George's heart warmed. "I'm sorry, too," he murmured. He gave Nick an apologetic smile, just to make sure that the younger man knew he was included in the apology. "I was freaking out, and I didn't stop to think that you guys were just trying to help me. But I learned a lot out there, so I don't think we'll have to deal with that again."

"Thank the gods," Nick chuckled. He slapped George's back fondly. "I don't know if I could have handled Angry Georgie again."

Clay and Nick both broke down in snickers, and George rolled his eyes, sinking to the bench. "Whatever. Can you guys go tell whoever I'm supposed to fight next that it's not happening? I don't think I could even drive a speeder right now."

Neither of them responded. George paused in bandaging his exposed right wrist and glanced up at his friends. Both watched him with giddy grins.

"George, you're done," Clay chuckled.

George's heart rate spiked by 100. "What?"

"You're done!" Nick repeated, throwing his arms out theatrically. "Eret caught us before we came down here and told us that it's over! No more fights!"

At that moment, if someone had told him to fly, George felt like he would have been able to. "Thank the gods!" he howled. George threw himself onto his back and finally let his body go limp. Muscles he hadn't even known existed ached, and his lungs were about to collapse, but by all the gods, he'd done it. He'd made it through the Council's shitty test of strength and come out better than he'd gone in.

That was the real victory, wasn't it?

"Alright, we are getting you out of here," Clay decided. He grabbed George's arm and hauled him



to his feet. George went with nothing more than a laugh. "I am going to make you rest for, like, at least two hours. Are you still up to dinner?"

George beamed. "Only if you're paying," he said lightly.

Clay gave him a warm smile, and George's insides curled into a couple of neat little knots.

"George, I would buy a restaurant for you after that performance," Clay chuckled. "Are you saying that's a yes?"

"Yes, of course."

"Hey!" That was from Nick, hurrying to catch up to them after grabbing all of George's things and the leftover snacks. George had to thank him for that later. "What about me? Don't I get dinner, too? Clay, I fought Georgie and almost won! Don't I get a consolation prize?"

George gave Nick a cheeky smile. "Sorry, Nick," he snickered. "Clay already promised me dinner. It's not open for discussion."

All the way back to Clay's room, and even through part of their daytime sleepover, Nick kept complaining about the unfairness of not being treated to dinner. The three of them spent most of the morning and mid-afternoon in Clay's room, letting George recuperate and giving all of them time to settle down.

George went through all of it absolutely glowing.

---

Techno slid up to Phil a couple of minutes after the fight.

"Didn't want to hang out down there?" Phil asked, amused.

The pig Jedi shrugged. "Nah. Too many people. They all wanted to congratulate me or something, I dunno. Why is everyone surprised that I won? It wasn't exactly a fair fight."

Phil chuckled. Most likely, no one was surprised, just excited. Though, the reasons as to why everyone was excited were probably extremely varied. "How's George?" he asked.

A smile touched Techno's face. "I think he's good. Better than when he started fighting, anyway. He'll be okay."

"I'm glad to hear it."

Phil glanced down at the arena. Below them, some Masters and Padawans had taken over the training arena and were using it for some extra practice time. Wilbur, Tommy, and Tubbo (though Phil had no idea where Dream's padawan had materialized from) were among them.

"D'you think the Council will let you keep training George?"

Phil considered for a moment. "I think so," he murmured. "He didn't beat you, and he barely won against Eret. I think those were the only prerequisites."

Techno chuckled dryly. "If Eret hadn't hit his elbow on the way here, George wouldn't have won."

"Probably not."

The two of them were quiet a moment longer, watching the Jedi below them. Finally, Phil put a hand on Techno's shoulder, gently pulling his partner to face him. The pig Jedi gave him a curious look but didn't flinch away.

“Thank you for not holding back with George,” Phil said softly. Techno's brow creased, but Phil held up a finger. “It was good for him to lose. I appreciate that you weren't dishonest.”

Something in Techno's expression changed. It wasn't embarrassment, exactly, but it was probably the closest that the pig Jedi would ever get to embarrassment.

“Yeah, sure,” Techno muttered.

Phil squeezed his partner's shoulder with a gentle chuckle. The warmth that flowed through their bond was proof enough that Techno appreciated the compliment.

After a few more minutes of silence, Phil gently took Techno's arm and walked away from the arena. “Let's get out of here,” he murmured. “I'm taking you straight to the infirmary. I'm amazed that you made it through that whole fight without coughing.”

As if summoned, Techno broke down into wet coughs. “So am I,” the pig Jedi grunted.

Phil shook his head a little. “You're out of your mind, Techno.”

“What does that say about you? You're partners with me.”

Techno stumbled, and Phil wrapped the pig Jedi's arm around his shoulders. Techno went without complaint.

“I know. Gods save me.”

## Chapter End Notes

Thank you all so much for reading! If you feel so inclined, please drop a comment and let me know what you've thought of the story so far! It means to world to have so many lovely comments from all of you, so thank you for each and every one :')

Due to some time-off and personal events, you might only get one update from me next week. But we'll see what happens! Regardless, you will see me sometime next week lol

Happy Thanksgiving to anyone who celebrates it! Have a great week for those who don't!

# Jericho, Part 1

## Chapter Notes

Trigger warning for graphic descriptions of injury and discussions of death.

Please read at your own safety.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Phil skimmed the page. After reading the tiny script for more than half an hour, he hoped that some meager amount of knowledge would suddenly appear. Nothing happened. Phil let out an exasperated sigh and rubbed his eyes.

“Bad, I thought you said this would help me understand,” he muttered aloud. “Not make me want to bang my head into a wall.” Phil narrowed his eyes at the page he was reading. “Wait, does this read back to front? Oh, in Tibulta's name...”

After nearly two days of debate, Phil and Eret had finally convinced the Council to continue George's training. Well, honestly, they hadn't had to push that hard. The Council had been divided on the former padawan since the moment of his return. The results of the battles had cemented their opinions: for better or worse.

However, there had been one anomaly among the bunch.

Cho-Nal.

The Jedi Master had been silent for the first day and a half of debate. Then, during the last vote, he'd agreed to let Phil continue training George. Phil hadn't even realized until after the meeting that Cho-Nal had tipped the balance in their favor. Why, Phil still didn't know. He was a little worried that Cho-Nal would someday ask him for a favor in return.

However, those were worries for a later date. Phil finally had the freedom to train George as he wished, so he wanted the engineer to learn pieces of every form. The agile man was well-suited to Ataru, but some defensive skills would make him a more well-rounded fighter.

Phil flipped another page, and his eyes finally landed on the passage he'd been looking for. “Thank the gods,” he muttered. The script was barely legible, but it was the best source he would ever find.

*“The Council has asked me to review my deepest emotions one last time before granting me permission to begin my studies. I am certain that this new ability is not one of Darkness or hatred. I feel complete control. I do not wish to harm anyone, nor do I feel that I am exacting revenge for a wrong done to me. I am merely experiencing an extension of the Force that I was previously unaware of. Should the Council allow me to study this new ability, I will call it Electric Judgment.”*

The rest of the entry was unreadable. Kel Dor had never been Phil's best language, and the handwriting of a native Kel Dor was positively ridiculous. Phil heaved a sigh and reluctantly closed the book. *At least I know how a Jedi Master handled it*, he thought absently. *I know George won't want to use lightning again, but he needs to know how to.*

Phil sighed again and pulled himself out of his depressing thoughts. He squinted up at the sky. Given its high position, it had to be well past 2 o'clock. Where on earth was Eret? The other councilman had arranged the meeting himself, and he was rarely late.

The bushes at the edge of the courtyard suddenly rustled, and Phil chuckled. There he was. "Still catching up on sleep, Eret?" he called, amused.

Then something whistled through the air, and Phil's brain screamed *DANGER*. His body threw him to the side before he could even see anything. Phil launched off of the bench and landed on all fours, hand already halfway to his lightsaber. But then, something pricked his neck. Dark spots immediately began drifting before his eyes. Phil blinked frantically, trying to clear his vision, but it did nothing. *What's wrong with my eyes?*

Five dark figures slunk out of the brush. They surrounded Phil in a ragged ring, each wielding a different weapon. One of them even clutched a spear that looked just like George's.

Phil hauled himself to his feet. His body seemed heavier than usual, but that was probably due to his unwieldy fall. His lightsaber hummed to life in his hands.

"Who are you?" Phil shouted. His tongue was thick, and he could barely get the words out. But he gave him time to think. There were two on his right, two in front of him, and one on his left. So far, no one was behind him, but that could change very quickly. Phil bent his knees and let his fear slip away.

Then one of the figures in front of him spoke with a voice like broken glass.

"We are the ones who will make the Temple fall before us."

They attacked as one.

Everything blurred before Phil's eyes. Sheer instinct brought his lightsaber up to defend against the first two attacks, and the Force guided him around a stab from behind. Phil whirled and lashed out at the sixth? seventh? assailant, but they were already gone. *Are they ghosts?* Phil thought, frustrated.

Two more attacks slipped off his lightsaber, but the third almost caught Phil's shoulder. He ducked and kicked, landing the blow on his assailant's knee. They screamed and collapsed in a heap.

Alright, that was one officially down. Four-

A blaster bolt shot through Phil's side. A fire burned along his entire left side, consuming his lungs and making it impossible to breathe. Phil stifled a scream and gritted his teeth against the pain. *No*. He was the Temple's last line of defense.

Phil Force pushed two more assailants away. It didn't seem to do as much damage as it usually did – and there were still at least five left. Hadn't he felled one of them? Phil sliced his lightsaber through a stray arm, then pirouetted and slammed his elbow into another's throat. They were all still on their feet. How was that possible?

The fire in Phil's side grew into an inferno, and he hissed, narrowing his eyes to slits. There were too many. He couldn't fight all of them in the state he was in.

Someone rushed, and Phil stepped to the side, letting them crash into their fellows. He didn't want to kill these people, but they fought like their fucking lives depended on it. Even if-

Pain like Phil had never felt before shot through his left shoulder. He screamed, yet it did nothing to relieve the agony. Phil collapsed to his knees, desperately trying to reach his shoulder and remove whatever had just impaled him. But his arms wouldn't move. Everything was fading into white-hot fire, and what little mental awareness he'd had before was almost gone.

The ground rushed up to meet him. Phil's entire body felt as if he'd been asleep for hours. But the pain was still there. It ate away at his consciousness, turned the nerves in his shoulder into nothing more than pain receptors. What had even happened? Was he about to die?

*They're going to destroy the Temple*, Phil thought. He barely managed to string the concepts together. *I have to get up.*

But there was no getting up. With each beat of his heart, Phil's head was spinning further and further beyond his grasp. He couldn't feel anything now, not even the pain. Everything was numb.

*“Get the fuck away from him!”*

Someone screamed. A lightsaber carved through the air, and Phil smiled.

*Good. Someone else is protecting the Temple.*

“Philza! Oh, gods, Philza, stay with me. I'm taking you to the infirmary. Don't close your eyes; focus on me.”

Phil blinked a couple of times. When had he rolled over to look at the sky? There was also a face gazing down at him, but it was fuzzy and distorted. All Phil could make out were two piercing, silver eyes. Didn't he know someone with silver eyes?

“Eret?” Phil slurred. “Eret. Thank you... tell Techno...”

Words became too much effort. The bliss of darkness called to him, so Phil closed his eyes. Eret was defending the Temple, now. What was the harm in Phil taking a break for a while?

“No, Philza, look at me! Phil!”

Phil was wrapped in darkness. Just before he passed out, the last coherent part of his mind screamed in rage, agony, and fear.

---

*Dun-dun.*

Techno flew down the hallway. Blood roared in his ears, and everything whipped past him in a blur. His breath came in short, ragged gasps. He *had to go faster*.

*Dun-dun.*

How long had it been? Eret had called him mere minutes ago, but how long had he waited to make the call? Seconds? Hours?

*Dun-dun.*

What if Techno was already too late? What if-?

*Dun-dun.*

*Dun-dun.*

Techno burst through the infirmary doors. He looked around wildly but saw no sign of blond hair or black robes anywhere. His heart climbed into his throat.

“Where is he?” Techno shouted. A couple of the nearby nurses flinched, but none of them responded. Frustration and rage and terror grew in Techno's chest until it felt like his lungs were going to explode. “*Where is Philza?!*”

“Master Technoblade, this is the infirmary,” one of the nurses said quietly. He held his hands out placatingly as if he expected it would calm Techno down. “We must ask that you lower your voice. The other patients here-”

Techno grabbed the front of the nurse's jacket and hauled the smaller man off the ground. “You tell me where Philza is, right now,” Techno snarled. “Or I will find him myself. *Do you understand?*”

“Master Technoblade!”

Techno whirled around. Another nurse (or maybe an actual doctor, due to her steely gaze) stood in the entryway to another room.

“He's in here,” she continued. “Follow me.”

Techno dropped the nurse like a sack of bricks. He chased after the doctor, but nausea and dizziness flooded his head with each step he took. It had been easy just to run to the infirmary and hope for the best. But now, Techno had to face reality.

*Dun-dun.*

*Dun-dun.*

Techno stepped into an empty ward. All of the beds had their sheets folded back - except for one at the very back of the room. Techno's hands started to shake.

“We're keeping him here because of you,” the doctor said quietly. “I knew that you would arrive shortly after his admittance. I thought it would be best to keep both of you away from our other patients.”

“Is he...” It felt like Techno's throat was made of putty. “Is he alive?”

“Yes.”

Techno's legs almost gave out from underneath him, and he grabbed the foot of a nearby bed to keep from collapsing. *Thank the gods.*

“But I warn you, he is not in good shape.”

The world narrowed down to nothing but the bed at the end of the ward. Techno longed to turn and run, to escape the nightmarish situation he was walking into. But he couldn't. He forced himself forward with halting steps. The closer he got to the bed, the more he saw.

A blanket was tucked around Phil's shoulders. His face was deathly pale, and his hair fell around his head in a golden halo.

*Dun-dun.*

Phil's full robes and lightsaber, and a small book sat on a side table beside the bed. That meant his injuries were bad enough that the nurses had had to put him in a gown.

*Dun-dun.*

Techno placed himself at the foot of the bed. His entire body crawled with fear, and he barely kept from shifting from foot to foot. "What's wrong with him?" Techno croaked. "I mean, he looks a little pale, but..."

The doctor gave Techno a concerned look. But, instead of saying anything, she grabbed the edge of the blanket and slowly pulled it back. The second the blanket dropped from Phil's shoulders, Techno's heart punched out of his chest.

Phil's left arm was gone. What remained of his shoulder was a mangled mess of burnt tissue and torn muscle. The tips of two different bones stuck out at odd angles, and his clavicle was clearly broken. As if that wasn't enough, fresh bandages wrapped around his torso and neck. Blood stained the bandages that covered his left side.

"He looked even worse when Master Eret brought him in," the doctor said softly. "We cleaned up his shoulder as best we could. If Master Eret hadn't cauterized the wound with his lightsaber, Master Philza would have bled out before he even got here."

*This is after it was cleaned up?* Techno thought. All his worry and stress had evaporated, leaving Techno feeling like an empty shell. It was better than wanting to throw up, he supposed.

"How long until he wakes up?" Techno rasped.

The doctor was silent.

No. No, *no, no*-

"Doc?" Techno asked, slowly turning to face the doctor in question. Her eyes were fixed on Phil's vitals. "How long until he's conscious again? When is he going in for surgery?"

"We are not yet doing surgery on his arm," the doctor said carefully. Rage flooded Techno's chest, and he wanted to punch her in the nose for dancing around his question. "We are waiting to see if cleaning away the infection and giving him a prosthetic arm is worth the risks that it poses."

"So you're saying that he's dying," Techno growled. "And instead of helping him, you're wondering how much money it's gonna take out of your salary."

The doctor turned a sharp look on Techno. "I am doing no such thing," she said testily. "During his battle, he was infected with some sort of poison. It is a neurochemical agent that we cannot flush out of his system. Whether Master Philza will survive this attack is entirely up to the strength of his body. *That* is why we are not putting him through surgery. If we weaken his body with more chemicals, he might not be strong enough to fight off the original agent. We have to wait."

It felt like the floor had dropped out. Techno's eyes were hazy, and his mind couldn't seem to put the doctor's words together. *Phil can't die like this*, Techno thought numbly. *He's supposed to go out in battle. Or of old age, after he's retired. Not... not like this...*

"I have other patients to attend to," the doctor said quietly. "I've already instructed the nurses to stay out of this ward. You may stay as long as you'd like."

The doctor flipped a switch on the device that sat next to the bed, then left the ward. Techno

vaguely heard her retreating footsteps. For what felt like an eternity, he just stood there, staring at his partner's pale face.

Eventually, Techno remembered how to move. He shambled to the side of the bed and sank onto the mattress. Without Phil's left arm in the way, he had more space than he was used to.

"I mean, a mechanical arm is pretty cool," Techno muttered aloud. He didn't even recognize his own voice. It cracked on every other word, and there was an emotion present that Techno hadn't heard from himself in years: fear. Genuine, uncontrollable fear.

It took Techno almost three full minutes before he worked up the will to move again. He was only aware of the passage of time because of a time display on the vitals machine. *I should call Wilbur*, Techno thought. It was a slow realization. *He needs to know what happened.*

Techno pulled his earpiece out of his robes and slotted it into his ear. But before he could give any orders, thundering footsteps approached the ward. Techno looked up and found a disheveled Wilbur standing in the doorway.

"Hey," Techno said blankly. "I was just about to call you-"

"What happened to him?" Wilbur demanded. His voice was filled with barely contained fury. As Wilbur approached the bed, Techno could see the veritable fire that burned in the taller man's eyes. "I swear to all the fucking gods- oh my gods, his *arm*-"

Techno looked down at his sleeping partner. "Yeah," he mumbled. "Phil is missing an arm now."

Tommy suddenly came charging into the room, visibly out of breath. He skidded to a stop at Wilbur's side and opened his mouth, a question already half-formed. Then his eyes landed on Phil, and his face paled. "Oh, Holy Kantos. That is fucking disgusting."

"It is," Wilbur seethed. He turned to Techno, and some part of Techno's half-functioning brain wondered if Wilbur was about to commit homicide. "Techno, what the fuck happened? Who did this to him? And who the fuck let this happen to him?"

It took Techno a painfully long time to sort through the questions that he'd been given. "I don't know," he said weakly. "I don't know... any of those things. I just got here."

Wilbur took a menacing step closer. "You don't know?" the other man demanded. "You don't fucking know what happened? How do you not?! Philza is your partner, Techno, and he's missing an arm! I think you should at least know why!"

A gate opened in Techno's chest. All his rage and terror and guilt flooded back into the void in his heart, and Techno stood with a furious growl.

"I wasn't there, Wilbur," he snarled. He fisted his hands in front of Wilbur's robes and dragged the taller man a step closer. "You think I don't know that this is a pretty dire situation? Phil is lying there, dying, and I can't do anything about it! *You think I'm okay?! That I'm just chilling?! No! I am helpless here!*"

Wilbur's eyes went wide. "Philza's dying?" he whispered.

All his emotions disappeared as quickly as they'd come. Techno was once again left with nothing but a void, and he heaved a weary sigh, setting Wilbur back on his feet. "Yeah," he muttered. "Doctor said he is. Some kind of poison. If that doesn't get him, the infection might. It's a waiting game."



"Waiting game," Wilbur mumbled to himself. "Fucking waiting game."

Wilbur backed up to the foot of Phil's bed. His face was as deathly pale as Phil, and he began to run shaking hands through his hair. At Wilbur's side, Tommy stood frozen. The padawan didn't even try to stop his Master from tearing out his hair, as he usually did.

"How long until we know if he's okay?" Tommy asked in a faint voice.

Techno shrugged. "Dunno. The doctors won't tell me."

"So he's going to... we're just..." Tommy inhaled shakily, and he shuffled a step closer to Wilbur. "We just have to leave him like that until he's... dead? Or not?"

The words were like a javelin to Techno's insides. "...yeah. If he survives, then the doctors will do surgery on his arm. If..."

He decided not to finish that sentence.

Wilbur pulled the holopad from its clasp on the foot of the bed and scanned the screen. "Did Eret tell you anything?" he asked without looking up. "He just called me and told me that Phil was here."

"Called me, too," Techno mumbled. "Didn't really tell me anything."

They fell into silence. Tommy looked progressively sicker and sicker the longer he stared at Phil. Wilbur kept his eyes fixed on the holopad in his hands. What was Techno feeling? He was... empty. Nothing remained of anything except for dread: dread, and an all-consuming ache, one that threatened to swallow Techno whole.

Techno glanced down at Phil. His partner hadn't moved. The Jedi Master lay still, eyes closed, chest slowly rising and falling. If not for his stump of a shoulder, Phil would have looked like he was asleep.

*You have to wake up.*

The three of them sat around Phil's bed for another half an hour. Again, the passage of time eluded Techno's attention until Wilbur quietly said that he would talk to Eret. Techno nodded an affirmation and watched Master and Padawan leave.

It was worse, now that Techno was aware again. He was alone with Phil, and that made him feel like he was drowning.

*What am I supposed to do? I can't leave. What if he wakes up while I'm gone?*

But then again... there was a chance that Phil would never wake up. Then it wouldn't matter. Techno would have to get up, and-

"Master Technoblade."

Techno flinched, looked around at the sudden voice. It was the doctor again, carrying a bag of some clear liquid. "How long have I been here?" Techno asked. He winced at how rough his voice was, but the doctor didn't even give him a second glance.

"About three hours," she said evenly. She began switching the fresh bag for an empty one on the vitals machine. Techno knew nothing about how it all worked, only that it was usually done by

droids. He wasn't sure why this doctor was taking a particular interest in Phil's treatment. "Your friends left almost an hour ago."

"That long?" It had felt like minutes.

"Yes, that long." The doctor finished changing the bags and turned to look at Techno straight on. "Might I recommend you leave for a couple of hours, Master Jedi? Your mental health is going to be severely impacted if you stay here for too long. I believe there's an ongoing investigation into Master Philza's attack if you need something to do."

Techno smiled wryly. "I can't leave."

"Why not?"

"I'll never come back. I can't... do all of this again."

The doctor inclined her head slightly. "Very well. Should I have one of the nurses get you anything? A book, or your holopad?"

"No, I, uh... I have my stuff. Thanks."

The doctor nodded again. "Of course, Master Technoblade."

As she walked away, Techno felt a strange sense of guilt. This woman was taking care of both him and his partner, and he hadn't even thanked her. *Maybe next time she comes in*, Techno thought. His eyes fell on Phil again, and he swallowed thickly. *You're gonna thank her, too.*

Two more hours ticked away in slow progression. Techno barely moved. He sat in a chair at Phil's bedside and let his thoughts claw at him. Techno had never liked reminiscing on the past. It left too much room for doubts. But now, faced with an unbearable reality, it seemed like there was nothing left for him to do.

---

*"Was this really the best idea you could come up with?" Phil snapped. He leaned around the boulder they were cornered behind and fired a couple of shots. A barrage of blaster fire responded, and Phil pressed himself back against Techno's shoulder. "We're fucking stuck here!"*

*Techno coughed some of the dust and sand out of his lungs. "It's not that bad," he said absently. "Just a fully-armed militia. Easy win."*

*"Techno, they just brought out a rocket launcher."*

*Oh.*

*"Any constructive criticism would be greatly appreciated," Techno said hopefully. Phil tossed him a mild glare, and Techno shrugged defensively. "Okay, but to be fair, I'm not the one that got us stuck on this mission."*

*"You agreed to it!"*

*An explosion rocked the earth, and cracks began spreading across their boulder.*

*"We are losing ground!" Phil shouted. He grabbed Techno's arm and launched both of them into the air.*

*Techno only had a moment to throw out his arms before he crashed into the cliff face that had stretched above their hiding place. "I don't exactly see the tactical advantage in this position, Phil," he said nervously. "We're kinda exposed up here. As soon as they get their blasters out, we're dead."*

*Phil shot Techno a wild grin. "We just have to overwhelm them before that happens!" the Jedi Master said brightly.*

*Techno glanced down at the army below them. "There's at least 100 of them. There's one of you and one of me. That doesn't seem like a fair fight."*

*"Oh, come on, Techno. That's a perfectly fair fight."*

*Well, no arguing with that logic. Techno shrugged and pulled his lightsaber from his belt, activating the blade. Seeing the red light illuminate Phil's grinning face somehow calmed his nerves. Maybe because it was such a familiar sight.*

*"Okay, here we go," Techno announced. "Hold on."*

*He drove his lightsaber into the cliff face and slashed it apart, turning their perch into a catastrophic landslide. Techno laughed delightedly as he and Phil careened towards the suddenly terrified army. As they launched into battle, Techno found that 100 people really weren't that many. Not when they didn't know how to fight a Jedi face to face.*

---

Techno emerged from his memories and found a faint smile on his face. He'd forgotten about a lot of the missions that he and Phil had tackled. Maybe there was some good in reminiscing. If nothing else, it reminded him of everything he'd learned over the years.

The earpiece in his pocket suddenly buzzed. Techno jumped, scowled, then fished the small device out of his robes. He popped it into his ear with a sigh. "Yeah. Technoblade."

*"It's me. Eret."*

Techno sat up straighter. "What'd you find?"

*"They basically disappeared. Left before a couple of footprints, so we're gonna start looking for shoe matches. It's a long shot, but you never know. The only solid lead we've got is the dart that they got Philza with. Someone is going to analyze the poison and see what the antidote is."*

"Wait, what dart?"

*"It was in Philza's neck when I showed up. I'm assuming that one of his attackers stuck him with it."*

Techno exhaled softly, and guilty relief flooded his mind. "So that's why he couldn't fight 'em off," he murmured. "I... yeah, okay, good."

*"Yeah, that solves one mystery. But listen, Techno, we've got a problem. Philza's arm was cut off by a shikkar."*

"What?" Techno demanded. "You saw it?"

*"Before one of them ripped out of Philza's shoulder and ran, yeah. I don't think they expected me to*

*show up and ruin their assassination. There's a chance that they coated the blade with something, so I told the doctors to keep an eye on the wound."*

Cold fury coiled in Techno's gut. "You think this was an assassination attempt?" he asked, deathly quiet.

*"What else could it be? You don't go through all this trouble just to kill one padawan, or maybe a random Jedi. You certainly don't bring out a shikkar for a low-level target. Philza's a legend, Techno. Everyone knows him. I'm not surprised that our enemy is trying to take him out of the picture."*

Techno glanced down at his partner. *They're winning*, he thought desperately. Phil's skin seemed to have gotten paler and paler by the hour, and his face didn't look as peaceful anymore.

*"Techno? You still there?"*

"What?" Techno asked, startled out of his head. "Oh, yeah. I'm just... yeah, I'm here. What else?"

*"I was just gonna remind you to eat something. It's almost dinner time. And I could use your help sorting through some Archive files if you want to get out of the infirmary for a bit."*

Techno blinked. "Did I not see you come in?"

*"No. I just assumed that you haven't left."*

"Oh."

*"I'll be in the east wing if you decide to help me. Take care of yourself, Techno. Please eat something. You won't be able to stay awake without some food in you."*

Eret ended the call. Techno popped the earpiece out of his ear, and for a moment, he just looked at it. He was that predictable, huh? Everyone seemed to either know or have guessed that Techno didn't want to leave Phil's side. He would be defensive, but it was absolutely the truth. He didn't want to leave Phil alone for a single second.

Techno gave his partner a searching look. *What would you want me to do right now?* he thought miserably. *I'm lost here, Phil. Give me some help.*

Phil would undoubtedly want Techno to have some dinner and get out of the infirmary. He'd reluctantly agree to let Techno spend the night in the uncomfortable visitor's chair, but *only* if Techno ate something first.

Alright. That was what he'd do, then.

His legs ached after sitting for so long. Techno didn't even notice that they were numb until he stood up and very nearly fell over. He bit back a curse and steadied himself on the foot of Phil's bed.

*"Patient, Philza. Jedi Master and member of the Jedi High Council. No current apprentice."*

The holopad attached to Phil's bed seemed to be reading out his patient log. Techno ignored it and went about collecting Phil's robes and lightsaber. He would get them cleaned, then drop them off in Phil's quarters. However, Techno hesitated on taking the small book. He had no idea what it was. Well, might as well take it too, see if Bad knew where the book had come from.

*“Hidden name: Phil Watson. Partners with Technoblade.”*

Techno's heart ripped in two.

“I'll be back,” he murmured. He almost put a hand on Phil's good shoulder, but he controlled the impulse. “Eret is probably gonna keep me busy, but I'll be back. I promise.”

Techno left the infirmary. As he went, he gave the doctor a brief nod.

---

*“Hey, Techno!”*

*“Oh, hey, Philza. You're excited. What's going on?”*

*“I just talked to the Council, and they finally made their decision! They said yes!”*

*“...really? I didn't think they would.”*

*“Me neither!”*

*“You didn't think they'd agree, and you still tried?”*

*“Of course I did. Some things are worth fighting for, eh?”*

*“I'm not one of those things, Philza. Look, I know I've said this before, but as soon as this goes bad, I'm out. I'm not going to risk your career so that I can-”*

*“My career? Techno, I put my 'career' on the line the moment I asked to be partners with you. Do you really think I would have done that if I didn't believe you were worth it? And stop calling me Philza. It feels weird. You're comfortable with me calling you Techno, right?”*

*“Well, yeah, but-”*

*“Then call me Phil. I hope you know that I'm not taking no for an answer here.”*

*“...okay.”*

*“Okay. Well, the Council doesn't want to waste any time, so they already have our first mission lined up. Underworld mob boss needs a reckoning, so we're being sent to gather intel and figure out how she transports her goods.”*

*“That's our first mission?”*

*“Yup.”*

*“Wow. They're tryna set us up to fail, aren't they?”*

*“Probably. But who cares? We've both been to the Underworld before, so I say that we'll be back in four days with everything they want.”*

*“Three days. Staying anywhere for four days makes us suspicious.”*

*“Four. We need enough time, and no one's gonna notice us.”*

*“Three.”*

*"Four."*

*"C'mon, Philza- Phil. I'm better at espionage. I know what I'm talking about."*

*"Oh, do you? Then I guess we'll just have to see who's right. I think this is gonna be fun."*

*"You're insane."*

*"So are you."*

*"...fair enough."*

---

Techno closed the window behind him, then dropped to the floor with barely a sound. All around him, the infirmary lights were darkened. A couple of key lights illuminated the exits and doorways, but with most of the droids down for repairs, Techno was alone. The night staff was in the main guard room, taking their dinner break (Techno knew, he'd checked).

Even the near pitch blackness, Techno navigated the infirmary with ease. He'd spent so much time there over the years that he could basically give a tour with his eyes closed. Finally, Techno turned the last corner. He stopped in the doorway and stifled a strangled noise.

Moonlight streamed in through the windows, illuminating bands on the floor. One of the windows was positioned just right to bathe Phil in moonlight. He looked so peaceful.

Techno swallowed tightly. His body was shaking again. Even after a full meal and almost four hours away, he couldn't suppress the anxiety and fear that gripped his heart like a vice. He couldn't let go of it; couldn't control it.

Techno glanced over his shoulder, left and right. Nothing. He was alone. He took a deep breath, then stepped into the ward.

"I'm back," Techno said softly. For a moment, he felt stupid. But then the words came tumbling out, and he couldn't stop himself. "Sorry I took so long. Eret actually needed my help, then Wilbur called me. He's pretty distraught. Tommy's rattled, too, but they're helping each other out. They're better for each other than they think."

Phil was even paler in the moonlight. Techno gazed down at his partner for a moment before sinking to the bed.

"I'm not even supposed to be here," Techno said wryly. "The Council doesn't want you to have visitors until they figure out what kind of poison you've got in you. First time they don't want me to stay in here, huh? But it shouldn't take long. The droids are testing it against everything, even Underworld stuff. They'll find a match."

*I hope.*

Techno's skin itched like it was on fire. His mind screamed bloody murder, torn between what he'd taught himself and what he'd learned.

Finally, Techno caved. He reached out a hesitant hand and gently, carefully, laid it on Phil's good arm. Without his gloves on, Phil was warm to the touch, and when Techno pressed his fingers against the Jedi Master's wrist, a steady heartbeat greeted him. The contact grounded Techno, reminded him that Phil wasn't dead yet. The other man was still very much alive.

Techno ran a barely-there thumb over Phil's palm, over the scar that the other Jedi had gotten on one of their missions. "You can't die on me," he muttered. "It's selfish, but... I need you. I don't... I don't know how to be a Jedi without you. If it wasn't for you, I'd probably be dead by now. I can't..."

Sudden tears pricked at the corners of Techno's eyes. He tried to swallow them back, but they seemed beyond his control. Panic spiked in Techno's chest, and out of sheer desperation, he did something he hadn't done since first arriving at the infirmary: he opened himself up to the Force.

If anyone had noticed that Techno had closed himself off, they hadn't said anything. Techno appreciated that. But opening up again didn't help him to escape his emotions. Phil's light was so *dim*. The Jedi Master was usually as bright as a sun, radiant and warm. Now... he was muted. Like someone had covered him in ice.

Tears slipped down Techno's cheeks.

"You saved my life, Phil," he whispered. "But... I can't save yours. I'm just... stuck here. I'm so *helpless*."

Techno took a shuddering breath. His gaze was clouded by tears, but he made no move to wipe them away. His heart felt like it was being crushed, and his insides were being sliced apart by grief. He was dying from the inside.

"You can't die. I... I wouldn't even be here if it wasn't for you. Gods, I'd give my own arm for you to be okay right now. I'd do anything. If you die, I..."

His throat got too tight for him to speak. Techno let out a stifled sob, trying to make his voice work again. It wouldn't obey him. So Techno finally gave in. He slumped over, letting his crying consume his whole body. Techno shuddered with silent sobs, his hand still barely resting against Phil's.

"I don't know what to do if you die," he choked out. "You're my family, Phil. I can't lose you. I'm... I'm not strong enough to survive that."

Everything blurred into cloudy nothingness. Techno closed his eyes and took a deep, painful breath. It barely got air to his lungs, but it soothed some of the agony that ripped his chest apart. Another breath took a little more pain away.

Finally, Techno's sobs settled. Tears still slid from his eyes, but he didn't bother wiping them away. Phil had always told him that it was okay to cry. Techno hadn't really believed him until now.

"He'll be okay, Techno."

Somehow, Techno wasn't even surprised by the sudden voice. Maybe he'd noticed someone else without realizing it. Regardless, he shifted and looked over his shoulder. After a moment, a figure moved out of the shadows.

"How long have you been here?" Techno asked, as evenly as he could manage.

George shrugged awkwardly. "A couple of minutes before you showed up," he mumbled. "I didn't get to visit Philza earlier, so I snuck in. Thought no one else would be here. I thought you were a nurse, but then you started talking, and I..." George rubbed the back of his neck. "Look, I'm really sorry. I can just leave; I didn't-"

"It's okay," Techno said, and he was surprised to find that he meant it. He waved a hand invitingly,

and George took a couple of hesitant steps towards the bed. "I won't stay long, either. Just wanted to see him again."

"Yeah."

George's eyes filled with pain as he looked at Phil, and Techno almost smiled. Looked like he and the engineer did have something in common.

Maybe that was why he didn't mind that George had seen him cry. Either that, or it was because the engineer didn't know the pain that came with Techno's tears. Shared misery or ignorance: either worked.

"Are you going to train with someone else?" Techno asked quietly. George glanced at him, visibly confused, and Techno lifted a shoulder. "Just until Phil's back on his feet. I imagine you wanna keep training since the Council gave you the okay."

"Oh. Well..." George sighed heavily. "I don't know who else would help me. Philza's always been good to me. He's probably the only one who was willing to teach me in the first place."

Techno smiled. "Yeah. He's like that."

They fell quiet for a moment. George clearly wanted to say something, but Techno had never been good at starting conversations, especially emotional ones. Either the engineer would say something, or he wouldn't. Techno wasn't going to involve himself in that process.

Eventually, George spoke. "Is there anything I can do?"

Techno tore his eyes away from Phil's pale face and looked up at the engineer. "What?"

"To help figure out what happened. Rhodys is treating it as a subsection of the whole task force, so they assigned a new group of people, but... I can't just sit here. I have to help him."

Techno chuckled humorlessly. "You and me both," he muttered. "Talk to Eret. He probably knows the most, right now."

Another silence.

What would Phil want George to do if he was incapacitated? He'd want the engineer to find another teacher; that much was obvious. But who would he pick? *No*, Techno thought stubbornly, after he'd considered the question for a moment. *That's not what Phil would want. I'm not thinking clearly.*

...no. Techno was perfectly clear-headed. He almost knew Phil better than he did himself.

"Hey," Techno said slowly. George glanced at him and Techno very nearly lost his nerve. "I know I'm the last person you'd ever want around, but... if you want some help to train, I could... I'm available, I guess. Or I could talk to Eret for you. He's probably a better teacher."

George raised his eyebrows. "You'd do that?"

Techno resisted the urge to shrink away from the engineer, as he usually did when faced with emotion. "Yeah. I can help you until Phil's better."

A small smile touched George's face. "Thank you. I'll let you know if I want to take that offer."

"Okay."



They sat in surprisingly companionable silence for another long moment. Eventually, George muttered a goodbye and left the ward. Techno was left alone once again.

Phil really did look so pale. Techno would give anything to see his partner's smile again.

Techno turned his eyes to Phil's good arm and scanned the scars that decorated it. The two faint ones that wrapped around his bicep. The new, long one that ran down his forearm, which was still a little pink at the edges. The ridged one on his palm. The faded ones that decorated the back of his hand.

There was a story painted in Phil's scars. Techno had the privilege of knowing the entire story, front to back, and yet, he'd never appreciated it. Had he ever even properly thanked Phil for everything he'd done?

Techno didn't know.

Even worse, he might never get the chance.

The tears came back quickly. This time, Techno couldn't find any words. The anguish in his chest choked him from the inside, ripping apart everything he'd built to keep himself steady.

Techno slumped forward and rested his forehead on Phil's shoulder.

Every other time he'd felt so terrible, Techno had reached out to Phil for support. He'd never even realized it. But now, Phil wasn't there. Their bond was a chasm in Techno's chest, a void where his partner should be.

*Please*, Techno thought desperately. *Please. Don't die on me.*

Techno finally let himself hold Phil's arm. His partner's skin was too clammy, his pulse was too weak. Even worse, he didn't grip Techno back. A sob slipped through Techno's lips.

*Don't die on me.*

## Chapter End Notes

I'm so sorry.

Thank you all for reading! While this one was very difficult to get through, it is unarguably one of my favorite chapters that I've written to date. I really hope that y'all enjoyed it as much as I did, even if it hurt. Please leave a comment if you're so inclined and let me know what you thought :D

I'd like to make something very clear as well, so there are no misunderstandings: this is not a ship chapter. Please refer to the tags and know that they have a deep connection due to what they've been through together. Don't make this into something it isn't, alright? Alright. Y'all are the best.

I'm going to be pretty busy for the next couple of weeks, so please expect a chapter a week (every Friday!). But who knows, I might spoil y'all with two lol. Have a wonderful week!



## Jericho, Part 2

### Chapter Notes

Trigger warning for discussions of death (it's not as bad as the last chapter, I promise).

Hello, everyone! I was planning to say that we've got a shorter chapter today, but somehow, I still ended up at 6k words. I don't get it either lol. Anyway, we've got just one POV today, but I think it's a very important one and a very touching one. I hope that y'all enjoy this chapter as much as I did.

Oh, one thing before we start! It is with great pride that I have an announcement to make: I finally got my art account on Instagram back up and running, and I've started to post artwork for this story! You can find me at @zairielon, same as this user. If you don't want to check me out, that's totally fine! I won't post anything there that is crucial to the plot! But, if you want some little bonuses (such as my ideas of how their outfits look or dramatic moments in art form), feel free to come and find me, and say hello! I'd love to hear from you! :D

Alright, now you can enjoy the update!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

*“Wilbur!”*

*“What, Tommy? Don't call me-”*

*“I did it! I actually did it!”*

*“Oh? What'd you do now?”*

*“I can read people's minds! I can pick out their individual thoughts and everything!”*

*“Really?”*

*“Yes, really! Just- come on, follow me!”*

*“Hey, don't pull my fucking robes! Alright, alright. I see a courtyard full of people. Whose mind did you read?”*

*“All of them! No, I'm serious! Okay, you ready for this? That guy just got promoted to master, and now, he wants to get on the Council. That woman is a closeted lesbian. She's trying to figure out how to confess to her crush since they've known each other for a really long time. That other woman is gonna meet her new padawan today, and that guy next to her is a padawan. He just failed his Trials for the second time. Oh, uh... and he's very angry about that. You might wanna keep an eye on him.”*

*“That's all very specific, Tommy.”*

*“I'm not making any of it up!”*

*“I know you aren't. I'm trying to compliment you, if you'd shut up and listen to me for a second. Your descriptions of their thoughts are very precise, which tells me that you're better with control. And none of them want to fucking kill you for invading their privacy, so you've also gotten better with delicacy. I'm impressed, Tommy.”*

*“...thanks.”*

*“Did you try a more linear focus, like I suggested?”*

*“Yeah, that helped a little. But mostly, I just figured it out.”*

*“I'm sure you did. Alright, psychic wonder, your free time is up. Did you finish your assignment for Master Rhodys, or do I have to go run interference for you again?”*

*“In my defense, it was a study into why emotional relationships are dangerous for a developing padawan. I already don't care about dating. Who the fuck would I even date here? Anyway, I didn't see why the study applied to me. Besides, you've already 'crippled' me, as Master Rhodys would say.”*

*“Crippled you? Are you telling people that I don't feed you or something?”*

*“Fucking hell- no, of course not. You know what I'm talking about.”*

*“Yeah, yeah, I know. Well, it's not too much of a surprise. You just swore at me, Tommy; I think that's proof enough that we're not normal.”*

*“So... what am I going to do about the analysis I have to write?”*

*“You know, I just remembered that I have to talk to Rhodys about one of the meditation techniques they taught you the other day. I, personally, have never heard of it, and I'd just really like to know its origins.”*

*“Do you need a book from the Archives to further illustrate your interest?”*

*“As a matter of fact, I do. Thank you for reminding me, Tommy.”*

*“You're welcome. Should we head to the Archives now? I have, uh... I have some bullshitting to do.”*

*“No time like the present. Let's go.”*

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Wilbur's obsessive behavior was back. Sometimes, he'd make a quick trip to the Archives or get up long enough to take a shower or eat. But most of the time, he wouldn't move for hours on end. He would just sit at his desk and swipe through hundreds and hundreds of files.

Tommy knew that Wilbur wouldn't have eaten or slept (or even blinked) if he hadn't been there to tell his Master to do all those things.

It had started up again after the first attacks on the Temple. Wilbur's tendency to neglect his health had acted up, so Tommy had responded accordingly (“Wilbur, do I have to fucking force-feed you? You're supposed to be a *responsible* adult, for Kantos' sake.”). For a while, that had been enough. Then Philza and Techno had gone to the Underworld, and things got worse again. But once Wilbur had literally passed out after working 24 hours straight, Tommy had thought things would be okay.

He'd never been more wrong.

Tommy hadn't seen Wilbur look so bad in a very long time.

Tangled, messy hair, wild eyes, pale cheeks, and bags under his eyes that were dark enough to be tiny black holes. It had only been two days since the attack on Philza, and yet, it looked like Wilbur had been slaving away for weeks.

Wilbur suddenly straightened from his hunched position, and Tommy hid behind the edge of the doorway. Wilbur was aware of his presence (most of the time), but Tommy didn't want to take any chances in startling his Master. That might get him a lightsaber to the face.

In a fucked up way, Tommy wouldn't mind the lightsaber. At least then, he'd know that Wilbur was still in there, somewhere.

No such luck. The taller man just grabbed something out of a drawer and continued working.

Tommy chewed his lip. When it came to reading people, Wilbur was by far the easiest. His Master put up shields, sure, but Wilbur was basically an open book due to their bond and Tommy's special affinity. But during these periods of obsession, Tommy closed himself off. He didn't want to know what his Master was feeling. He didn't want to know what went through Wilbur's head when the taller man's dark eyes unfocused.

"Tommy?"

Shit.

"Yeah?" Tommy shouted back.

"Come here for a second. I want to make sure I'm reading this right."

Tommy buried all of his fear and worry (fuck it, *yes*, he was worried) under his usual bravado, then strolled into the main room. He barely contained a wince at seeing his Master up close.

"What were you doing in my bedroom?" Wilbur asked distractedly. His eyes didn't leave the holographic screen on his desk. "Did you let your food get cold? They haven't installed my heater yet, so you won't be able to warm it up."

Tommy cast a brief, guilty look at his abandoned lunch before drawing his mask up. "I was just looking around," he said nonchalantly. "They did a great job of remodeling. Truly amazing, what a week can do for a place. Anyways, what did you want me to read?"

Wilbur jabbed a finger at the name of a file. "What does that say?"

*It's in fucking block letters, and you can't read it?* Tommy thought worriedly. But he bit his tongue, leaned closed to the screen, and dutifully recited, "Mazenos Aquil. It's Master Mazenos' personnel file. Looks like it was created when they got accepted onto the Council."

"Fucking hell," Wilbur muttered. "I thought it was for someone else."

The taller man took off his glasses and ran his free hand over his face. Tommy shifted awkwardly, waiting for his Master to draw himself back up and continue working. But Wilbur didn't. He just sat there, fingers pressed into his eyes.

"Will," Tommy began hesitantly. "Do... do you think it might be time to take a break?"

"I can't take a fucking *break*."

Logically, Tommy knew that the venom in Wilbur's voice wasn't aimed at him. But the words still stung, and the tip of a knife pressed against his heart.

"I'm just saying, you look exhausted," Tommy protested. It pained him to continue speaking, but he'd been silent long enough. "I can handle whatever you're doing. I mean, it's not like you haven't shown me this stuff before. If you'd just sleep for a bit-"

Wilbur stood and slammed his hands down on his desk. "*I'll sleep when I'm dead, Tommy!*"

Ice-cold terror wrapped around Tommy's heart.

"That's not going to happen," he bit out. Tommy was vaguely aware of how angry he sounded, but fear pumped through his veins, and blood pounded in his ears. He wasn't really thinking straight anymore. "Wilbur, you *need* to take a break. It's been days, and you-"

"*You can't tell me what to do.*" Wilbur loomed over him, and it took all of Tommy's nerve not to back up. "Philza is dying," the taller man continued, his voice a veritable hiss. "If they can get to him, they can get to anyone. I'm not stopping until we're safe."

Tommy's hands shook. "You're one man," he said desperately. "I'm just as worried as you are! But don't you remember what happened last week? I had to pick you up because you couldn't fucking see where you were going!"

For a moment, Wilbur hesitated. Then he set his jaw, and pure panic shot through Tommy's chest.

"It doesn't matter," Wilbur muttered. "Go find Tubbo if you don't want to be here. Or talk to Bad, tell him that you want to catch up on your training. I'm sure he'll make time for you. Gods know he was a better master to you than I ever was."

*Wait, what?*

"What?" Tommy demanded aloud.

An expression Tommy couldn't decipher flashed over Wilbur's face before disappearing under a wall of cold aloofness.

"Nothing. Get out of here."

Wilbur sat back at his desk, hunching his shoulders and more or less burying himself in work. Had it been any other situation, Tommy might have made peace with that outcome. Maybe he would have come to terms with his Master's stubbornness and accepted that he couldn't always get a straight answer.

But after seeing Philza confined to an infirmary bed, barely hanging onto life, Tommy couldn't stop picturing Wilbur the same way.

He grabbed Wilbur's shoulder and pulled his Master away from the desk.

"No!" Tommy shouted. "I'm not leaving until you take a break!"

Wilbur's eyes flashed dangerously, and he stood once again, hands clenched into fists. "Tommy, I can't!" he barked. "Not until I do something to help!"

"How are you helping?!"

"I am digging through every fucking lead that we have! If the Council and the task force won't tell us everything, then I'm figuring it out myself!"

"You haven't found anything!"

"I won't unless I keep looking!"

The reins that had Tommy had placed on himself snapped, and he stepped directly into Wilbur's personal space. "You're going to kill yourself!" he shouted. For once, he didn't care that desperation cracked his voice.

Wilbur's hands shot up to grab Tommy's shoulders. "*I have to protect you!*"

The room went deathly quiet. Tommy swallowed once, twice, trying to wrap his head around the words that still lingered in the air. When he couldn't, he searched his Master for any sort of explanation. Now that the mask was gone, Wilbur's face clearly bore the signs of the same fear that Tommy felt. The lines around his eyes spoke of soul-sucking terror and grief, not indifference.

"What?" Tommy croaked once he'd finally found his voice.

For the first time in days, Wilbur's eyes softened from hardened earth to their usual warm caramel.

"Tommy, they got to Philza," Wilbur said weakly. "*Philza*. If they can put him down, they can get to anyone. Techno's basically out of the game, and without him and Phil around... Tommy, I'm not enough to protect you by myself. You and I both know that." Wilbur took a shuddering breath, and his grip on Tommy's shoulders tightened. "If the task force can't get their fucking act together, then we're at the mercy of whoever's attacking the Temple. I can't- I *won't* let you be killed by these maniacs."

Tommy felt like he'd been submerged underwater. He couldn't breathe, he couldn't *think*. Wilbur... Wilbur was doing all of this for him? Sure, they were Master and Padawan, but... His Master was driving himself into the ground just to keep Tommy safe?

"Tommy, I'm so sorry." Wilbur was speaking again, and for a split second, Tommy thought he saw tears in his Master's eyes. "I... I'm not very good at this. I'm not very good at a lot of things. But I promise, *I promise*, I will keep you safe. Once everything settles down, you and I will get back on track for your Trials. Until then... maybe you should train with Bad. He's not doing anything right now. Just-"

"No," Tommy blurted, interrupting Wilbur and surprising both of them. Pride and ego flared in his chest, but Tommy tamped it down and kept talking. "I'm not leaving. Look, I'm perfectly healthy. Take a fucking nap. Well, first tell me what you're doing, then take a nap."

For a moment, they just looked at each other. Then a warm smile spread over Wilbur's face.

"You weren't even listening to me, were you?" the taller man asked fondly.

Tommy hesitated. He'd been listening very closely. But, if he was honest, he just didn't want to address everything that Wilbur had said.

"Of course I was listening," is what Tommy said aloud. "You said you'd keep me safe, and I believe you. But you're not getting rid of me just like that. Fuck my training. This is more important. I'm staying, and I'm helping, whatever it takes."

Wilbur shook his head with a faint smile, and Tommy barely kept from grinning a little. Since

when did seeing his Master smile make him smile, too?

...maybe since Wilbur had stopped smiling.

“Alright, well,” Wilbur murmured. “First, I want to get your opinions. Tell me what you think is going on.” Tommy started to smirk, but Wilbur cut him off with a wave of his hand. “No, Tommy, this isn't fucking rhetorical. Just sit down and tell me what you think.”

Tommy reluctantly choked down the smartass remark on the tip of his tongue and sank onto Wilbur's sofa. He spared a moment to be amazed (and worried) at how familiar the cushions were.

“Why do you want my opinions?” Tommy asked. “Do you know something the rest of us don't?”

Wilbur narrowed his eyes. “What did I just tell you to do?”

Tommy lifted his chin in defiance (because Wilbur wasn't wearing his “shut the fuck up” look; he was wearing his “are you challenging me?” look). “You told me to tell you my thoughts,” Tommy parroted. “But I think I deserve some information first. You've kept me locked up here-”

“I literally just told you to leave.”

“-and I've just been waiting this whole time. *Patiently*, I might add. So? What have you found?”

Wilbur rolled his eyes, but he rested his chin against his hand and gave Tommy an even look. “You want my honest answer?” he asked.

“Of course,” Tommy snapped. Fear coiled in his stomach, but he steadfastly ignored it. “I'm not a child, Wilbur. I can handle whatever you think I can't.”

That... wasn't entirely true. But, as Tommy saw it, it was better to be overwhelmed than uninformed.

“Alright,” Wilbur muttered. He ran a tired hand over his face, then met Tommy's gaze. Tommy barely kept from shifting under his Master's piercing stare. “Short answer, I think we have a traitor. Long answer, it's the only thing that makes sense. Our Underworld investigation is going nowhere. We know that Illumina is involved and that someone was tracking Phil and Techno, and that's it. But up here... Delphina's not herself, and everyone on the Council wants Phil gone. What if someone is funneling information to our mysterious enemies?”

Shit. Maybe it *was* better to be ignorant.

“Wilbur, you're talking treason,” Tommy said slowly. “I know everyone on the Council are dicks, but you're kind of reaching. Do you have any proof?”

Wilbur cracked a self-satisfied grin. “Why do you think I've been pouring over these files?”

The penny dropped, and Tommy stood, peering over his Master's shoulder. “You're researching the Order,” he murmured. He couldn't even deny it; he was impressed. “Everyone. That's why you were looking at Mazenos.”

“Yup.” Wilbur popped the “P” and spun his chair back around to his desk. Tommy took a step back, just to make sure his Master didn't accidentally hit him. “I've been looking at everyone. So far, they're all clean. But there's a couple of anomalies. And, of course, there are things I can't get my hands on.”



"There are things you can't get your hands on?" Tommy repeated mockingly. "Never would have guessed."

Wilbur's dirty look carried a hint of steel. Tommy snapped his mouth shut and made a show of examining Wilbur's screen.

"Here's everyone I have reason to be suspicious of," Wilbur said, pulling up a separate page of holographs. "Cho-Nal is a given since he hates all of us. Delphina, obviously. The rest of the Council, these guys, and..."

Tommy narrowed his eyes at the last person on the list. "Eret?"

"Yeah."

"But..." Tommy shot Wilbur a confused look, but his Master resolutely ignored him. "Why Eret? Didn't he get Philza to the infirmary after the attack? And hasn't he been working to keep Dream and George out of trouble?"

"Yes," Wilbur agreed, and the single word seemed careful. "He has. Like I said, I'm just suspicious. I don't have any leads on him. But think about it, Tommy. The reports go like this: Phil was hit with an enhanced neural tranquilizer, then he was attacked. There were at least seven assailants, which Phil barely managed to defend against before..."

A sick feeling rose in Tommy's throat. The image of Philza's severed shoulder appeared in his mind, and he swallowed his nausea. "Arm," he said thickly.

"Yeah. Arm." Wilbur rubbed his eyes, then continued. "Anyways. Eret showed up, fought off the attackers, then got Philza to the infirmary. But, in all of this, Eret is our only witness. The hit on Philza was clearly planned, and Eret could have lied about *everything* to protect himself."

"Why?" Tommy asked again. His head was starting to hurt from following Wilbur's gymnastic leaps of logic. "Why would Eret do any of this?"

Wilbur shrugged slightly. "I dunno. I haven't found a motive yet. But, honestly, I'd be suspicious of anyone who was our only witness."

*Even me?* Tommy thought. But he didn't say that aloud. That was another problematic question he didn't want to address.

For the next couple of minutes, Tommy just peered over Wilbur's shoulder as his Master flipped through page after page of files, absorbing all the information he could. But, eventually, Tommy's morbid curiosity got the best of him. A question bubbled out before he could check himself.

"Will?" Wilbur hummed absently, which Tommy took as a "go ahead." "Do you think Philza is going to survive?"

Wilbur's hands froze. That was not the answer Tommy wanted.

After a very long moment of silence, Wilbur sighed. "To tell you the truth, Tommy, I don't know," the taller man murmured. "I wish I could tell you that he'll be fine, but... we don't know that. I'm praying that he's strong enough to pull through."

Tommy nodded slightly. "Okay."

He wanted to cuss out the gods for inflicting such a horrible fate on Philza. *Philza*, of all the people

in the Order. What had the Jedi Master ever done to deserve dying a slow, drawn-out death? Gods, Tommy longed to find whoever had orchestrated all of the Temple attacks and cut off one of their arms, so they'd be as crippled as Philza would forever be. Sure, there were prosthetics (which Philza would get... if he survived). But prosthetics never got rid of phantom pain or granted their users immediate mobility.

"Don't look for revenge, Tommy," Wilbur murmured. "The Order is wrong about a lot of things, but I think they got that one right."

Tommy shook himself out of his thoughts and gave his Master an incredulous look. "Okay, there's no way you just *guessed* that I was thinking about revenge," he spluttered. A slight smirk turned the corners of Wilbur's mouth, and genuine annoyance sprouted in Tommy's chest. "No, I'm fucking serious. *How* did you know that?"

Wilbur met Tommy's gaze evenly. "You're strong, Tommy. I'll even say that you're stronger than most people, just by natural ability. But did you really think that I, as your Master, don't have the power to work through your shields? A bond goes two ways, Padawan. You forgot about that, didn't you?"

*Wh- what the fuck?*

"*You* can see through *my* shields?" Tommy hissed. He wasn't sure if he was embarrassed, angry, impressed, or some strange combination of all three. "All this time and I thought I was- *you know what goes on in my head? And you haven't kicked me out of the Order?*"

Wilbur chuckled. "No," he said, clearly amused. "Your thoughts are your own, Tommy. I'm not going to dictate what you can and can't think."

"I've thought about killing someone before!" Tommy burst out. In retrospect, that was a terrible thing to admit, but he was too confused to feel guilty. "Multiple times, in fact! Doesn't that warrant some kind of intervention?"

"Why? I've thought about killing someone before. Came really fucking close to doing it, too. It's just a human thing, Tommy. We're not much more than emotional monkeys."

Tommy pressed his palms into his eyes. Somehow, in ten minutes, Wilbur's exhaustion, stress, and irritation all seemed to have dissipated. Tommy, however, was still very much tired and anxious. He didn't like the power imbalance.

"Hey."

Tommy took his hands away from his face and found Wilbur giving him an unreadable look.

"I really don't tell you this enough," the taller man began haltingly. "But... it's gonna be okay. I know it's a false hope, but it's still hope. Philza is going to survive, we're all going to be fine, and we'll catch the bastards that are doing this." Slowly, Wilbur put a hand on Tommy's shoulder, and a fond smile touched his face. "We'll make it, yeah? Nothing's over until we give up."

Well... fuck. How was Tommy supposed to respond to that? "Cool, thank you, I'm sorry that my safety is causing you stress. Literal, debilitating stress"? That didn't seem to cover it.

"Thanks, Will," Tommy muttered eventually. He felt like a fucking idiot, but his options were "sound stupid" or "talk about emotions." Neither was preferable. Sounding stupid was barely acceptable.

Wilbur nodded once, then turned back to his screen. "Give me your holopad."

Tommy dutifully handed it over and silently thanked the gods that he didn't have to look Wilbur in the eye.

"Alright, I'm sending you everything." Wilbur tapped a few buttons on Tommy's holopad, and immediately, a download bar appeared in the top corner. "All the files of all the Jedi I haven't cleared yet," Wilbur explained, jerking his chin at the names. "I trust your keen judgment to dismiss them or give them a closer look. Feel free to check my work, too."

Tommy looked at his Master for a moment. Wilbur still bore dark circles, tired eyes, and an exhausted slump of the shoulders.

"Get up," Tommy ordered.

One of Wilbur's eyebrows lifted to comical height. "I'm sorry?"

"Get your ass out of this chair and go lay down. You look like you're going to pass out. *Again.*"

Translation: *I'm really, really worried about you, so go take a nap while I deal with this shit.* But Tommy hoped that Wilbur couldn't detect his individual thoughts, just pieces and impressions. He didn't need his Master to hear his exact phrasing.

Wilbur heaved a dramatic sigh and stood, waving Tommy towards the chair. "All yours," he drawled. "If you adjust the seat, I'll break your fucking legs."

"Yeah, whatever," Tommy muttered. He immediately adjusted the seat. "Go lay down."

Wilbur snorted, then drifted out of Tommy's line of sight. A moment later, there was a soft grunt, and their bond flooded with warmth and relief. Tommy felt his shoulders loosen just from Wilbur's comfort. He smiled to himself, then put his fingers to the holographic keys and began looking through the personnel files of every Master he'd ever argued with.

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*Tommy glanced up at Philza, who was watching the battle below them with an appraising eye. "Why are Wilbur and Techno fighting each other again?" he asked quietly.*

*Philza shot Tommy an amused smile. "Because Wilbur has to learn confidence, and Techno has to learn restraint. It's a perfect match-up. They're both being pushed beyond what they're comfortable with."*

*In the arena, red and amber clashed in a vicious song. To Tommy's eyes, it looked like Wilbur was just trying to survive.*

*"I don't get it," Tommy muttered. "Wouldn't it make more sense if you fought Technoblade?"*

*Philza chuckled, waving a hand at the fight. "Here's how I see it," the Jedi Master said lightly. "Techno is more powerful than Will, right? But he doesn't want to hurt Will, so he has to use his power in moderation. In return, Will needs to step out of his comfort zone if he wants to survive the fight since Techno is stronger than him."*

*Tommy considered for a moment. He kind of understood, but there was one thing that bothered him. "Techno's still way more powerful," he protested. "Wilbur is bound to lose."*

*"You think so?"*

*"Yes."*

*"Alright. Do you think you could beat Will in a duel?"*

*Tommy opened his mouth to say, "yes, of course," but he paused. There had been that one time when Wilbur had beaten him within minutes. And the time before that, when Wilbur had made Tommy stumble around like a drunken goat. And, well, there was the fact that Tommy couldn't even land a hit on Wilbur when they were practicing a new move...*

*"No," Tommy admitted eventually. "I don't think I could."*

*Philza grinned. "He's stronger than you give him credit for. You'd do well to remember that."*

*Tommy grumbled and crossed his arms, but really, all he was doing was disguising his confusion. Was Wilbur stronger than him? Tommy approached every duel of theirs like he was destined to win, but somehow, he could only remember a handful of times where he'd actually won.*

*...was his Master powerful enough to hold his own against Technoblade?*

*"Hey, Tommy! Master Philza!"*

*Tubbo suddenly bounded out of the Temple, settling himself next to Tommy. Tommy greeted his best friend with a punch to the arm, which Tubbo gleefully returned before peering into the arena.*

*"Afternoon, Tubbo," Philza greeted cheerfully. "Where's Dream?"*

*"With Master Bad," Tubbo said, eyes not leaving the fight. "I did so well on my practical exam that he let me have the day off. What's going on?"*

*Tommy rolled his eyes. "We're watching Wilbur get his ass kicked." A hand hit the back of Tommy's head like a whip, and he yelped, clutching at the new sore spot. "What the fuck was that for?" he demanded to an impassive Philza.*

*"Don't talk about your Master like that."*

*Tommy opened his mouth to protest, but Philza turned a dangerous glare on him. Fear touched Tommy's mind, and he decided that, for once, his ego wasn't worth defending.*

*"I'm the first one to approve of your unconventional training," Philza said evenly. "That includes you talking back to Wilbur, so you learn independence. But he is still your Master, and after everything he's done, I'd say that he deserves some respect."*

*All the times that Wilbur had beaten him in a duel flashed through Tommy's head once again.*

*"Yes, Master Philza," he murmured.*

*Philza turned away without another word.*

*"Are you okay?" Tubbo hissed. The shorter boy gently pried Tommy's hand away from the point of impact, and he winced slightly. "It's not bleeding or anything. But you are going to have a nasty bruise."*

*"Won't be as bad as my ego," Tommy grumbled. "I'm fine. I'll get some ice or something."*

*They watched the rest of the fight between Wilbur and Techno in relative silence. In the end, Techno won with an incredible spin that nearly sliced part of Wilbur's hair off. When the three of them went down into the arena, Tommy couldn't bring himself to make fun of Wilbur for losing.*

*Later that night, when Wilbur asked Tommy why he was so quiet, Tommy responded:*

*“Just thinking about something Master Philza said. I'm fine.”*

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Tommy leaned back in his chair with a satisfied sigh. After an hour of looking through every file on every Jedi, things were finally sorted out. Tommy had made separate folders for suspicious and unsuspicious candidates, and he'd almost put Dream in “suspicious” for a good laugh. But he'd restrained himself. Barely.

It wasn't perfect, of course. But it was good enough so that Tommy and Wilbur would have a much smaller pool of suspects to look at.

That is, once Wilbur woke up again.

Tommy glanced over his shoulder. Wilbur was still sound asleep on the couch. One arm was thrown over his face, and his chest gently rose and fell with the cadence of a peaceful man. Sadness touched Tommy's mind. Wilbur had fallen asleep immediately, and his quiet snores had provided Tommy with oddly soothing background noise.

How many sleepless nights had Wilbur suffered for him? How many arduous fights with the Council; how many sacrifices?

“You're not a bad Master,” Tommy murmured. He knew that talking to a sleeping Wilbur was cowardly, but it helped. At least he was saying the words aloud. “I don't know what my training would have been like without you. All the other masters are so prissy and uptight, but with you... I get to be an actual person. I don't know.”

Wilbur shifted, and Tommy froze. Then the taller man gave a sleepy grumble, shifted once again, and settled. Although Wilbur was clearly still asleep, Tommy didn't speak again for another five minutes.

“I know you'd die for me. And that's kind of scary. I don't really know what I'd do if you died, and with Philza hurt, I... I'm kind of realizing that that could happen to any of us. I know it sounds stupid, but... look, just don't die. I need you alive. For- just stay alive.”

A blush touched Tommy's cheeks, and he scowled, clamping his hands over his face. This was stupid. He was just talking to a sleeping man; he didn't need to be embarrassed. So, if all that was all he was doing, then... he might as well get a bit more off his chest.

“I'm sorry for making you put up with me,” Tommy muttered. His blush got worse, but this time, it was out of shame. “I'm... I'm not very easy to deal with, I know. Not that you're any easier. But... thank you. You do a decent job of 'protecting me,' or fucking whatever. Look, I... I need you to stick around, Master. We can do this. I just need you to be healthy *and* alive.”

Tommy huffed out a breath. That had been a lot, but he felt better a bit. His crippling guilt and anxiety had been alleviated, which made the embarrassment worth it. Tommy inhaled sharply and went back to looking over the files.

A couple of minutes later, a quiet voice came from the couch.

“I think that's the first time you've ever called me 'Master.'”

*OH, FUCK-*

Panic froze Tommy to his chair. He couldn't tell if he was blushing or paling, but ultimately, it didn't matter, *because oh my fucking gods, Wilbur had heard him pour out his soul.*

The couch creaked slightly as Wilbur's weight left the cushions. Footsteps padded towards him, and a ball lodged in Tommy's throat. He took a shaky breath, but the air just didn't get to his lungs. Wilbur had fucking heard him, and *dear gods, the shame was going to devour Tommy like-*

Gentle arms wrapped around Tommy's shoulders.

“I'm always gonna be here for you, Tommy, I promise. You're never getting rid of me. Even once you're a Knight.”

Tommy tried to swallow. But he was something uncomfortably close to choked up, so the action didn't do anything except make his throat feel thicker. “Yeah,” he mumbled. “I imagine you'd never leave me alone.”

Wilbur chuckled, and his arms left Tommy's shoulders. The two of them had never been the most affectionate (in absolutely any regard), but Tommy immediately missed the brief hug. He missed the contact. Wasn't that forbidden in the Order? He vaguely remembered a rule about not getting too close to his Master, but over time, Wilbur had kind of thrown the rulebook out the window. Could Tommy even fake a test with a traditional Master anymore?...

“What have you got?” Wilbur asked, breaking Tommy out of his thoughts.

Tommy brought his attention back to the present, then tapped Wilbur's screen. “I narrowed down your list,” Tommy said, and he was relieved to find his voice steady. “These are all of our suspicious lads. These are the ones I cleared, but you can look at them, too.”

Tommy opened the folder of clean Jedi for Wilbur's examination. The taller man scanned the names with narrowed eyes, and after a moment, he nodded.

“I don't have a problem with them, either. Let's see the suspicious lads.”

*Swipe, swipe.*

“Yeah, that looks about right. Good eye, Tommy. Looks like we've got our suspects.”

*I know I've got a good eye; thank you for finally acknowledging it,* is what Tommy wanted to say. “I tried,” is what came out, and with a much softer smile than he'd planned for. Tommy scowled because, damn it, his Master's praise didn't mean *that* much.

“So, what now?” Yes, yes, Tommy was just trying to distract himself. It was still a legitimate question. “We've scoured the files, and we have our suspects. How are we gonna find out if they're committing treason against the Order?”

The hint of an impish grin tipped the corners of Wilbur's mouth. “Get a hold of Tubbo,” he said, drumming his fingers on the desk. “I have an idea.”

“What's this big idea?” Tommy asked suspiciously. “Is it going to get me in trouble? Or get Tubbo in trouble? I don't want this to fall on his head.”

Wilbur snorted. “Half of what you two do in your spare time is illegal. Of course we *could* get in trouble. But we won't.”

“That's still not an answer,” Tommy muttered.

Wilbur flung the chair around, and Tommy suddenly found himself face to face with his Master's wild grin.

“What we're going to do is very illegal and would get us arrested if we're caught,” Wilbur said brightly. “Tommy, we're going to hack the system. If the Council is going to keep us out of the loop, then we're going to see who we can and can't trust for ourselves.”

And damn it all, his Master's reckless determination was infectious. Tommy grinned back.

“I'll give Tubbo a call. We've got work to do.”

## Chapter End Notes

I'm gonna say this until the day I die: I only wrote this story for wholesome Master/Padawan interactions.

\*cough\* also, can we normalize using the "arguing but then they admit they love each other" trope for platonic pairings? Please and thank you.

Never fear, Dream, George, and the rest of the gang will return next chapter! I haven't forgotten about them! But this arc is most definitely the Sleepy Bois arc.

Thank you all so much for reading! Please leave a comment if you are so inclined, and as always, thank you for your continued support! I'll see you next week!

(P.S., next week is the finale of this arc. And trust me, it's going to be a hell of a ride.)

## Jericho, Part 3

### Chapter Notes

Y'all remember what I said last week? "It's gonna be a hell of a ride?" Today, I offer you 13k to make good on my promise.

Welcome, friends, to the finale of Jericho! I did not mean for it to end up being this long but damn it, man, there was just too much good story to tell. A lot of love, sweat, and tears (yes, tears) went into this update, and I really, really hope that y'all like it as much as I do. This is truly the pinnacle of my abilities lol

As I've mentioned for the past two updates, trigger warning for discussions of death and violence. Every update after this one will carry the same warning, so please, read at your own safety. We're getting into the thick of it now, lads.

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“Tommy wants you to do *what?*”

Tubbo winced, shrinking into his robes. Okay, yes, once he'd said it aloud, he'd realized how ridiculous it all sounded. Gods, he should have just gone without saying a thing to Dream. But the guilt would have eaten him alive, so here he was, stuck defending Tommy and Wilbur's harebrained plan. That would get them in considerable trouble if a single thing went wrong.

“Do you realize that if anyone catches you, you're gonna be arrested?”

“Yes, Master,” Tubbo mumbled.

“And that I'm not rich enough to just bail you out of a problem like this?”

“Yes, Master.”

“Okay. Tell Tommy we're on our way.”

*Wait, what?*

Tubbo blinked, and he finally tore his eyes from the carpet. At some point during Tubbo's embarrassed head-hanging, Dream had gotten his robes and mask and now held both in his hands with a shit-eating grin.

“We?” Tubbo repeated dumbly.

“Yes, we,” Dream said cheerfully, slotting his mask over his face. “I'm not going to let you do something expressly illegal with me. That'd be irresponsible.”

Tubbo had never felt so lost in his whole life.

“Alright, I'm ready.” Dream slipped his lightsaber into his belt, then left the room, never losing his



bright grin. "Come on, Tubbo! We've got crimes to commit!"

Tubbo cringed at his Master's shout, and he hurriedly followed Dream, closing the door on his way out. "Shouldn't you be a little bit quieter?" he asked in hushed tones, falling into step beside Dream. "I don't think we should be announcing what we're doing to the whole Order."

Dream ruffled Tubbo's hair affectionately. "Relax. No one's out here, and even if someone heard me, they wouldn't take me seriously. Message Tommy."

Tubbo had nothing to say in response to that, so he just fixed his hair and pulled his holopad out of his pocket.

*Omw with Dream. We'll be there in five minutes*

Tommy's response was instant. *Why is Dream with you?! We are doing illegal things!!*

*I know! But he wouldn't let me go by myself!*

**DID YOU TELL HIM**

*Yes!!! I'm not going to disappear on him again!!!!*

**WHAT THE FUCK TUBBO**

Dream suddenly chuckled, and Tubbo glanced up at his Master. Dream was already looking back at him with an amused smile.

"Tell Tommy that I know something about technology," Dream suggested. "That might make him feel better."

*Dream says he knows about technology??*

**THAT DOESN'T MATTER**

*Omg it'll be fine. Maybe we won't get caught if Wilbur and Dream are both there*

**MORE PEOPLE IS NOT STEALTHY**

Anxiety clawed at Tubbo's stomach, so he shoved his holopad back into his pocket without sending a reply. This was by no means the first time that he and Tommy had hacked something. But, even after all their years scheming together, they'd never done something that was *literally against the law*. Tubbo preferred to find loopholes that were just on the side of legality and exploit those.

"Is this really a good idea?" Tubbo asked aloud. He kept his eyes fixed on the ground as he spoke. "I mean, I don't exactly trust Tommy and Wilbur to create a foolproof plan."

Dream patted Tubbo's shoulder. "That's why I'm coming with you," he said lightly. "Why are you so worried? You do this kind of stuff all the time."

Why wasn't Tubbo surprised that Dream knew of his and Tommy's... adventures?

"Hacking in the safety of my room is one thing," Tubbo mumbled. "This is going to cross hundreds of thousands of servers, and there's gonna be security protocols that I've never even heard of protecting this stuff. If I mess up, I might accidentally destroy something!"

"I told you, I know the systems. I'll help you if you need it."

That just begged the question, "Had Dream hacked the Temple networks before?" The answer seemed to be "yes," but Tubbo decided that was a question better left for another time. Or perhaps, never asked at all. Tubbo didn't want to be called in as a witness years down the line.

Four minutes later (*How did Dream walk so incredibly fast?*), Tubbo and Dream arrived at the Temple's communication center. Given that it was the middle of the day, the center was nearly empty. Even so, Tubbo's heart threatened treason as he and Dream crept through the first couple of chambers. Tubbo only started breathing again once they made it to the designated meeting chamber and the door shut behind him.

"*What took you so long?*"

Tubbo blinked in the dim lighting. After several seconds of squinting into the darkness, he picked out Tommy and Wilbur hunched by the far wall.

"We made it here in four minutes!" Tubbo hissed back. Now that he was actually out of Dream's quarters, he felt like he was going to throw up. But he forced his nausea down and hurried to join Tommy at one of the many terminals. "Move over. Who am I starting with?"

"Dream," Wilbur said pleasantly before Tommy could say anything. "Fancy seeing you here. Did you need to send a message today?"

Dream chuckled. "No, nothing like that. I just wanted to keep an eye on my padawan."

"Shut up," Tommy hissed. Tubbo winced at his best friend's harsh tone, but Wilbur and Dream both just shrugged a little and waved for Tommy to continue. "Right, *thank you*. Okay, Tubbo, here you go. This is the list of people we're looking for."

Tommy held up his holopad. Two, four, six... dear gods, there had to be at least twenty names. Tubbo had no idea how he would find all their files before he accidentally tripped a security alarm or otherwise messed something up. He took a shaky breath, then set his fingers to the terminal's control pad.

"Okay," Tubbo mumbled. "I'll start with Cho-Nal."

Tubbo's first couple of strokes were awkward and stiff. He felt like he was a youngling again, just learning how to use a lightsaber. But after a couple more commands, calm settled over him. Each new screen and firewall that flew past his eyes was a soothing balm. This was what Tubbo knew. Even more than lightsabers or the Code or anything else about being a Jedi, Tubbo knew technology. It responded to his commands like an obedient dog.

The back door into Cho-Nal's files was child's play to find. With no small amount of glee, Tubbo noted that Cho-Nal's files were even less protected than the plans for the training arena's reconstruction.

"I've got it," Tubbo announced, once he made sure his presence was undetected. "Everything on Cho-Nal that's in the system, even his personal communication logs."

Dream's hand suddenly landed on Tubbo's shoulder. "Good job, Tubbo," he murmured.

Tubbo beamed. "Thank you."

Wilbur appeared at Tubbo's other shoulder, leaning into the holographic display. "Alright, we're

looking for anomalies,” the Jedi Master said slowly. “Past affiliations, old friends, suspicious money vacuums. Hell, make sure that he doesn't have any troublesome siblings.”

Tubbo nodded and began scrolling through Cho-Nal's files. They spoke of a perfectly normal Jedi. Cho-Nal was a standard Jedi Master Councilman, with a traditional raising in the Order and a regular lightsaber. Nothing of particular interest or suspicious nature existed in his history.

“Cho-Nal's even drier than I thought,” Dream muttered. “Okay, uh... try message logs. Go back to a couple of months before the attacks.”

Again, Tubbo did as he was told, and again, Cho-Nal was clean. The Jedi Master didn't talk to anyone except when he needed something, so most of his messages were only a couple of sentences long.

Until-

“Wait,” Tubbo blurted. “This is a day before George's battles. Cho-Nal told Philza that George had to fight to prove his worth. Does... does that mean that Philza didn't already know? There wasn't a meeting about it or anything?”

Wilbur leaned further over Tubbo's shoulder, and Tubbo watched, horrified, as Wilbur's face grew darker and darker.

“No, there was a fucking meeting,” the taller man muttered. “But Phil wasn't a part of it. They were fucking pushing him out.”

Tubbo swallowed. Gods, Wilbur was scary when he was angry.

“So, wait a second,” Tommy cut in. He leaned over Wilbur's shoulder, and Tubbo silently noted that his personal space was getting very cramped. “Are you telling me that the Council has been cutting Philza out of their meetings in general? Did they just decide that not having Philza around was better?”

Dream shoved an arm between Tommy and Wilbur, and they both stepped away from Tubbo with a muttered apology. Tubbo shot his Master a grateful look, which Dream acknowledged with a small nod.

“Look, Cho-Nal has always been an asshole,” Dream said. “It's definitely suspicious that Philza got attacked so soon after being 'removed' from the Council, but it's all circumstantial. Let's move on for now.”

Tubbo did. He carefully closed Cho-Nal's files and navigated to the next person, Delphina. The encryption on her files was different, but nothing that gave him any trouble.

“I'm in,” Tubbo announced, for the second time in as many minutes. “Same criteria?”

“Same criteria,” Wilbur agreed.

Unlike Cho-Nal, Delphina's files were scarce. She spent most of her time on Coruscant, meeting with the Council or preparing off-planet missions for other Jedi. There was nothing significant about her. Even her message logs were boring (most of which were directed to her friends, whom she discussed cooking and gossip with). The only remarkable thing in the entirety of Delphina's files was a new report detailing her worrying behavior during George's latest hearing.

“Delphina's clean,” Tubbo muttered. “I mean, she's not, 'cause she went crazy, but her files say

she's clean.”

Dream, Tommy, and Wilbur let out a collective sigh, and Tubbo was tempted to do the same. At first, he'd been so sure that someone in the Order wasn't who they said they were. But so far, they'd turned up nothing but blanks.

Tubbo shook off his dour mood. *I can do this*, he thought stubbornly. *I've only looked at two people. There's got to be something here that helps us!*

Over the next two hours, Tubbo went through every name on Tommy and Wilbur's list. Tubbo's abilities were tested by some of the firewalls, but he made it through every time. However, his efforts came to naught. None of the Jedi were dirty. Some had failed missions, others had personal issues, and there was the occasional scandal. But for the most part, they were what Tubbo would expect from the Jedi Order: upstanding, law-abiding citizens.

After the last Jedi had come and gone, Tubbo finally stretched from his hunched position. “That was disappointing,” he mumbled. “I'm glad no one's a traitor, but... now what? Master Wilbur, didn't you say these were our only leads?”

Wilbur's eyes were still fixed on the holographic screen. “Yeah,” the Jedi Master muttered. “Aside from the scraps that the Council has given us, anyway. Gods, I wish we could hack actual people. I want Cho-Nal to spill his fucking guts.”

That sounded suspiciously like murderous intent, but Tubbo decided not to mention it.

“So, that's it?” That was from Dream, who now leaned against a nearby table. “That's all we have?” he continued. “And, what, we're back to square one? Are we gonna start sending people back to the Underworld again?”

Tommy and Wilbur exchanged a look, and Tubbo's stomach clenched. “What is it?” he asked quietly. “What aren't you telling us?”

Tommy didn't meet Tubbo's gaze. Instead, he looked to Wilbur, who sighed heavily.

“We have one more suspect,” Wilbur admitted in a low voice. “And we didn't want to bring him up unless there was no one else left. Tubbo... I want you to look up Eret.”

Tubbo blinked. *Eret?*

“Eret?” Dream demanded. “Eret has done nothing but help us! Hell, he's the one who took Philza to the infirmary after his attack! Why are you suspicious of him?”

Their bond clouded with indignant anger, and Tubbo swallowed nervously. He didn't want Dream and Wilbur not to start fighting. Not now, not with so many other things going on.

Luckily, Wilbur seemed ready to be challenged. “We just want to cover all our bases,” he said carefully, holding out his hands out placatingly. “He was our only witness to Phil's attack, so I want to make sure he's someone I can trust. If he's as good of a person as you say he is, then we won't find anything in his files.”

Tubbo stuffed down his fear and laid a gentle hand on his Master's arm. “We're already here,” he said softly. “It wouldn't hurt. Maybe we'll find something else.”

Dream glanced at him, silent for a long, long moment. Finally, he nodded. “Alright,” Dream muttered, and Tubbo heaved a sigh of relief as his Master's anger waned. “Go ahead and look up

Eret. Maybe we'll find something.”

He clearly wasn't happy, but it was better than a fight.

Tubbo turned back to the terminal. *Please, no more*, his aching back wailed. Tubbo ignored it and settled his fingers back on the control pad. He flew through the system, following the pathways that he'd used to find every other Jedi's files. But suddenly, he was blocked by an impenetrable wall. Tubbo frowned and reran his commands, telling the system to search beyond the firewall. Nothing. Even after being pitted against the best tricks Tubbo knew, the wall stood firm.

“Master?” Tubbo asked hesitantly. Dream immediately appeared at his shoulder, and Tubbo pointed at the screen. “What is this?”

Dream's face darkened. “That's a High Council seal,” he muttered. “It protects the Council's most important information, like prison records and war logs. This is Eret's file?”

Tubbo nodded miserably. From what Dream had told him of the Jedi with the silver eyes, Eret had seemed like a good person. Tubbo didn't want to hear about *another* asshole on the Council.

Dream gazed at the display, absently chewing his lip. Eventually, he nudged Tubbo's arm, and Tubbo obediently moved aside. Dream's fingers flew over the control pad as he typed out a complex sequence. To Tubbo, it didn't look like much more than a random string of commands. “*Search for [name],*” “*highlight every mention of [event],*” “*search all archives.*” What good were parameters against a firewall?

Then the screen dissolved into a flurry of blue pixels. When it rebooted, Eret's files sat before them.

Tubbo stared at his Master. “What the hell?” was all he could manage.

Dream grinned. “I told you, I know tech,” he said evenly. “I don't want to be stupid about what I use every day.” In a quieter voice that only Tubbo could hear: “I discovered that back door years ago. It's a shortcut that the Council installed so they can quickly shut down the system. Turns out, it works the other way, too. Restart the system, and it goes back to its previous screen, whether it was locked or not.”

Tubbo considered that for a moment. Maybe Dream really did know something about technology that he didn't. Tubbo resolved to question his Master at length later, then centered his attention on the new files.

He started with Eret's message logs. And gods, the inbox was packed! Tubbo expected something interesting, but to his disappointment, most of the messages were mundane Council business.

Then he found a series of dummy folders that led to a secret conversation. In it, there were hundreds of messages between Eret and Philza.

“Here!” Tubbo called. “Looks like Eret and Master Philza have been talking ever since Philza got elected. Uh, their most recent messages are about the attacks... wait, there's something else! Eret told Philza that he heard from one of his contacts. According to this contact, Delphina was seen heading into the Underworld with a ton of money.”

“That's really fucking sus,” Wilbur muttered, which earned him a sharp look from Dream. “What? That's a weird thing for Eret to say, especially less than a week before Phil's attack!”

Tubbo held up a hand to stop the fighting, and to his amazement, it worked. “Um, one last thing,”

he said hesitantly. “Their last message was a day before Master Philza's attack. Philza told Eret that he's figured out George's Force lightning ability and asked Eret for his opinion. Eret responded by setting up a meeting for the next day, which...” A ball lodged in Tubbo's throat. “Which never happened.”

The room fell into silence. Eventually, Dream broke the silence with a sigh and waved his hand. Tubbo took that as his cue to keep looking.

“There's nothing else here,” Tubbo mumbled. “Um... yeah, looks like-” He suddenly came across a large file with two more firewalls, and Tubbo's heart sank. “Oh. Never mind, there's... there's something here. It's dated from years ago.”

The extra protection was gone with a single command. Tubbo opened the new file, vaguely aware of his companions leaning over his shoulders once again.

*Excerpt from Master Kan Bo Salem's personal log: It has been 6 months since the Siege of Genden. At the beginning of this time, I was instructed to assist [REDACTED] [public name: Eret] in his rehabilitation. Now, I give my final statement. He has changed. His learning of Vaapad was, regrettably, unsuccessful; however, Juyo has proven to be a perfect match for him. The High Council does not seem to share my opinion that he is capable of attaining greatness, so I will attach my full records and findings to my official report. Perhaps that will convince them of Eret's potential.*

*However, I must give a word of caution to whoever takes my place once the Council has inevitably removed me. Eret still carries sensitive tendencies. Should he become overwhelmed, it is best to leave his training unfinished for the day. There is still much left for him to learn.*

Tubbo couldn't believe it. He shook his head, rubbed his eyes, and reread the file, but nothing changed. The file didn't magically rearrange itself, nor did the words on the screen become any less damning.

*This reads just like old Sith passages in the Archives. Is... is Master Eret a Sith?*

“Where's the rest of the fucking excerpt?” Tommy demanded. “That can't be it!”

His best friend's voice broke Tubbo out of his thoughts, and he frantically searched the rest of Eret's files. “That's all that's left,” Tubbo said weakly. “There were some links in this file, but they don't lead anywhere now. This is it.”

Everyone was quiet. Tubbo continued looking through Eret's files, desperately trying to find something that would clear Eret's name. But there was nothing. Nothing.

*Is Master Eret a Sith?*

“What the fuck is the Siege of Genden?” Wilbur muttered eventually. “I've never heard of that, and I was taught by fucking Master Adoli. I learned more history from him than I did from the Archives.

“And who the fuck is Kan Bo Salem?” Tommy added. He reached for the control pad, but Tubbo gently smacked his hand away. “Ow. Okay, fine, since I can't touch the special thingy, look up Master Kan Bo Salem.”

It took almost two minutes to find any results. And even then, Tubbo had to pull the two tiny files from the deepest vestiges of the system.

“Kan Bo Salem,” Tubbo murmured aloud. “This is all I can find on them.”

The first was a simple personnel file. It was so badly corrupted that all Tubbo could pull from the data were a few basic facts. His name was Kan Bo Salem, he was 52 years old, and he arrived on Coruscant as an orphan. That wasn't helpful in the slightest.

The second was a transcript. Again, the file was polluted by data corruption after one too many systemic revamps, but a couple of sentences still remained.

*On this day, the **11101010101010** have made our decision on the **010101010101010111** Salem. His behavior in the **1101010** and among our Order is immoral, and we will not see him **001010100000** to us. Kan Bo Salem, you are exiled from the Order. Your lightsaber **1011111110** and records. Do you have anything **1010101010100000000000***

“That's why I've never heard of him,” Dream muttered, once Tubbo closed the two files. “He was exiled when I was still a youngling. Someone went to a hell of a lot of trouble to wipe him from the system. There should be logs of his missions, even if he was expelled.”

Wilbur leaned forward. “What can you find on the Siege of Genden?”

The answer was nothing. Tubbo's search didn't even yield a corrupted file.

Dream suddenly placed a hand on Tubbo's shoulder, and he glanced up at his Master.

“That's it, Tubbo,” Dream said gently. “We're done. Wipe your presence, then stretch or something. You look like you're in pain.”

Now that Dream mentioned it, Tubbo's back did feel like it had been repeatedly clobbered with an iron pole. Tubbo did as he was told, shut off the terminal, then stood and stretched his arms over his head. Tubbo couldn't tell if the pain that shot up his spine was from relief or injury.

“That was fucking something,” Wilbur sighed. “Alright, where does that leave us? What do we know?”

No one spoke up.

Tubbo settled himself on the floor and glanced between Wilbur and Dream. Both were deep in contemplation, faces downcast, shoulders hunched. Confusion radiated off of them in broken waves, and honestly, Tubbo was no better off. His head hurt from so much information.

“Are we going to tell the task force about this?” Dream asked eventually.

Wilbur shook his head. “No. This isn't conclusive evidence, but if Eret is a traitor, we have to keep this knowledge from him. If he finds out- look, all I'm saying that is the timing is awfully convenient for someone's looking to take Phil out of the game.”

Dream crossed his arms. “I'm not going to treat Eret like a traitor until we know what all of this means,” he said coldly. “Not after everything he's done for me.”

Wilbur bristled, and Tubbo shot Tommy a frantic look. If Wilbur and Dream started fighting now, everyone was doomed. The task force needed their smartest members to be on top of their game and working together, not locked in a grudge match.

But before he could prevent the inevitable argument, *something* happened.

One moment, he was sitting cross-legged. The next, the sound of shattering cement filled the air, and Tubbo was flying across the room.

His shoulder crashed into solid metal, and what felt like a knife dug into Tubbo's upper arm. Then something snapped. Pain shot up his entire left side, and Tubbo could only manage a hoarse scream before he collapsed in a heap, vision blurred and eyes streaming.

*What's going on?* Tubbo tried to ask. What came out was a strangled noise, and coughs wracked his body for his attempt at speech. Each shuddering cough made pain race along his arm.

“Tubbo! Tubbo, can you hear me?”

Someone touched his arm, and Tubbo screamed again, unable to communicate any other way. The hand immediately disappeared. Tubbo desperately wanted to just curl up and sob until the pain went away, but then, someone picked him up. It took Tubbo several seconds to realize that he was off the ground and even longer to recognize Dream's face.

“Master?” Tubbo croaked.

Dream's mask immediately turned towards him. “I'm here, Tubbo, I'm here,” he murmured. The warmth in their bond and the worry in his voice made up for the expressionless mask. “I'm getting you out of here.”

Tubbo tried to look around, but even the small movement made his arm feel like it was on fire. He let out a pained whine, and fierce protectiveness flooded their bond.

“You're safe, Tubbo, I promise. A tank of bacta, and you'll be good as new.”

“What happened?” Tubbo asked, barely forcing the words out. “Are Tommy and Wilbur okay?”

Dream was quiet for a moment. “I don't know what happened. But Tommy and Wilbur are fine. They're a little banged up, but they're scouting ahead of us to make sure that it's safe.”

*Why wouldn't it be safe?* Tubbo thought.

A faint shout rang out in the distance, and Tubbo's tinny ears identified the voice as Tommy's. What he said, Tubbo had no idea. But Dream immediately picked up the pace, hurrying them towards some unknown goal.

Strange light hit Tubbo's eyes in a blinding burst. He hissed and curled into Dream's chest to try to protect himself. But this time, Dream didn't comfort him. Instead, their bond filled with horror.

“Holy fucking Kantos.”

At Wilbur's murmur, Tubbo realized something was very wrong. He forced his head to lift once again, and he frowned, confused. The Temple looked purple, and the sky was dark. Tubbo's eyes must not have adjusted yet.

...no, his eyes were fine. Purple fire licked the Temple grounds, and the sky was clogged with smoke.

Cold dread spread through Tubbo's body, momentarily numbing his pain.

*Not again.*

---



The smoke in the air was suffocating. Clay's mask kept any oxygen that he managed to suck in from getting to his lungs, and as yet another plume of smoke erupted from somewhere nearby, Clay genuinely considered taking his mask off.

But that meant stopping. And Tubbo was worse off than he was. The dark-haired boy had buried his face in Clay's chest, occasionally coughing or moaning in pain when Clay accidentally jostled his arm.

*Hang on, Tubbo,* Clay thought desperately.

When the communications center had exploded, part of the floor had split away. As Tubbo had been sitting down, he'd had no time to catch himself. The pure terror of watching his padawan plummet to the other side of a fiery chasm still roiled in Clay's gut.

Tommy and Wilbur were... gods knew where they were. They'd told Clay to head for the infirmary to take care of Tubbo, then they'd taken off into the Temple. Hopefully, they were safe.

Another explosion rocked the ground, and Clay stumbled. One of his feet landed in a pit of purple fire, but he just gritted his teeth and yanked himself free. Was his foot burnt? Clay didn't know, and he didn't care. Tubbo was fading fast, heading towards shock more rapidly than Clay could run.

Yet another explosion coughed up a torrid plume of smoke. Clay tore his gaze away from the spectacle and focused on his distant goal. The infirmary was still standing; he could see the spire. If he just-

The ground crumbled away beneath Clay's feet.

It was sheer instinct that saved them. Clay threw himself at the nearest stable ground, which happened to be a low fountain. He twisted just in time to land on his back (keeping Tubbo safely in his arms), but the boy still groaned as he was jostled.

"Sorry," Clay mumbled. He carefully set his padawan against the wall of the fountain, then looked around.

The new chasm cut off Clay's most direct route to the infirmary. He could make the jump by himself, but with Tubbo in his arms, it was too risky. Especially since Clay's focus was wrecked. His drive to get Tubbo to the infirmary was the only coherent thought in a maelstrom of fear and anger.

Clay glanced down at his padawan. Tubbo's face was deathly pale, and blood seeped from the tear in his robes where his broken humerus had poked through the skin. It was a ghastly injury.

"Alright, Tubbo," Clay said quietly. "We're taking the long way around. Hopefully, it..."

Clay froze. Five figures in dark clothes were emerging from the landscape. Each one dressed in slightly different clothes, with some concealing obvious spikes or jawlines, and each clutched a different weapon. But with all the smoke in the air, their dark clothes made them look blurry. And a vengeful fire burned in their eyes. They wanted Clay's head.

*There's nowhere to go,* Clay thought desperately. Behind him yawned the new chasm. In front of him, the assassins blocked off every viable escape route. Clay was stuck between a rock and a rock, with his only other option being throwing himself into yet another rock.

Clay stood, drawing his lightsaber. "What do you want?" he shouted.

The assassin on the far left hissed a laugh. “We wish to see your Temple fall at our feet,” they rasped in a voice harsh with wear. “Jedi Master Dream is a very good place to start in *killing all the Jedi*.”

Clay sensed the motion before he saw it. He swung around to block the rightmost assassin, and had he been a second slower, his head would be on the floor. Clay swallowed his fear and shoved his assailant back. The slight figure went tumbling into the open chasm with a lusty wail.

The other assassins shifted and snarled, glaring at Clay with narrowed eyes. For a moment, nothing happened.

Then they attacked as one.

It was like being hit with a wave of scything blades. Clay Force pushed two away, then took on the remaining two with a vicious swing. Both recoiled, but the other two immediately replaced them. Clay stood his ground. He wasn't just fighting for himself; he was fighting for Tubbo. If he fell, Tubbo would be the next to die.

*These fuckers aren't getting my padawan.*

Clay spun in a deadly dance, leaping from one side of the fountain to the other to keep the assassins at bay. He tried not to kill any of them, instead aiming to injure them enough to put them out of the fight.

But none of them fell.

They stood, bearing terrible burns, and continued as if nothing had happened.

*Is this what happened to Philza?* Clay wondered blankly. *He got overwhelmed?*

Suddenly, something cut through the smoke with a sharp whistle. Clay sliced it away, then drove his lightsaber through one of the assassin's legs. They howled and toppled to the ground. As their fellow collapsed, the remaining three assassins retreated a couple of steps. Clay frowned. Why would they retreat? They still outnumbered him.

Another something whistled through the air. Again, Clay sliced it in half, and suddenly, a memory surfaced. *Philza got taken down with a neurochemical tranquilizer. They're trying to put us down like animals.*

Rage ran through Clay's veins.

A third dart flew from the other side of the courtyard, and this time, Clay snatched it from the air. He balanced, aimed, and launched it back at one of the assassins. Thanks to a little push from the Force, the dart moved faster than the assassin. They screeched, clawing at their neck.

“Take that, you son of a bitch,” Clay snarled. “I hope it hurts.”

The assassin froze. Slowly, they turned to stare directly at Clay. They ripped their linen from around their head, revealing a short mane around their face and a row of razor-sharp teeth. The lion creature (maybe a Cathar?) roared in fury, then charged.

Clay's mind went blank.

Then he stepped aside, and the Cathar flew past him. They scrabbled for footing in the water, and with absolutely no options left, Clay shoved. The Cathar tumbled over the other edge of the

fountain and disappeared into the chasm.

Clay whipped around. The other two assassins were gone.

“Time to go,” Clay muttered aloud. He scooped Tubbo back into his arms and took off across the courtyard. As he ran, something flew past his ear. Clay didn't stop to see where it had come from.

The inside of the Temple was blessedly rubble-free. Clay lifted a silent prayer of thanks and sprinted down the hallway. His tired legs carried him as fast as they could, but it still wasn't fast enough. Tubbo's breathing was starting to elevate; his chest rose and fell like a panting dog's.

“Hang on, Tubbo,” Clay murmured. He'd kept up a running string of chatter, just to distract himself from the horror of the situation. “We're almost there, I promise. The infirmary's right out there.”

*So is a literal hell. How did this happen again?*

Clay skidded around a corner and found his path completely blocked off by debris. “No, no, no,” he muttered frantically, panic clawing at his throat. His fear did nothing to move the gargantuan chunks of Temple wall. With no other options, Clay turned and sprinted back to the last ground-floor window he'd seen. The pane was already broken.

Clay launched himself through the window.

His ankles grated on impact, and glass shards tore the sleeves of his robes. Clay ignored the pain. Tubbo was still in his arms, and that was all that mattered. The infirmary was so, so close. It peeked into the sky, its spire shining with purple light from all the fires. Just had a little bit further.

For a moment, hope bloomed in Clay's chest like a spring flower.

Then the ground rumbled beneath his feet.

Panic gripped Clay's lungs, and he raced for the edge of the courtyard. But he was trying to win a race that he'd already lost.

The world split into five. Clay was tossed viciously to the ground, his ears ringing and head pounding. For a second, his vision went black. *No!* he thought. *Wake up!* When Clay finally blinked himself back to awareness, he was lying face-down in a heap of rubble, blood dripping from the tip of his nose. The courtyard had exploded. Purple fire now licked the stones, creeping towards Clay like malicious snakes. Tubbo-

-was not in Clay's arms.

Clay's mind went white. He scrambled to his feet, ignoring the pain signals that his body screamed at him and looking around frantically. Where was Tubbo? *Where was Tubbo?!*

There! The boy was laying on his back a couple of feet away, his left arm clutched to his chest. Clay sprinted over to his padawan and skidded to a stop on his knees.

“Tubbo, stay with me,” Clay murmured. “Come on, look at me.”

His padawan's face was streaked with tears. His eyes were narrowed in slits, and silent sobs wracked his frame.

“It hurts,” Tubbo whispered. He tried to look at Clay, only to flop back with a pitiful whimper. “Dream, please, make it stop. It hurts so much.”

Clay's soul tore in two. He carefully scooped his padawan into his arms again and cradled the boy against his chest. Tubbo leaned closer, shoulders still trembling, and Clay rested his chin on top of his padawan's head.

"I'll help you, Tubbo," he murmured. "Just give me a couple of minutes, okay? Hold on for me."

Clay poured all the peace and hope he could muster into their bond. Tubbo's shaking slowly eased, and Clay breathed a sigh of relief.

The courtyard was still burning. The fires billowed out giant plumes of smoke, and Clay realized that he couldn't see the exits anymore. Only the circle of ornamental pillars that surrounded them kept the fire at bay.

Clay held Tubbo closer. His padawan drifted on the edge of sleep, and Clay poured every last bit of calm he possessed into their bond. Tubbo didn't need to be awake for this.

Suddenly, a dark-clad figure moved out of the smoke.

"Jedi Master Dream," they snarled. "I believe you left before we could finish our last engagement."

Dull fear spread through Clay's body. "Leave us alone," he said quietly. "Please. My padawan is hurt."

The figure gave a harsh laugh, and a double-sided knife slid into their hand. "There's no mercy for people like you," they said, still laughing. "Not after the crimes of your ilk. Die as a warrior, Jedi. Or die as a coward like the rest of your Order. I don't care. Either way, I will see your demise."

Clay knew what was coming before the figure even finished their speech. He set Tubbo on the ground and drew his lightsaber, steadying his hands.

When the figure charged, Clay did, too.

The figure was swift, that was true. And, with all the smoke effectively blinding him, Clay was at a disadvantage. But he would not let Tubbo die.

Their fight was brief. Clay's determination lent him extra strength, and in two quick strikes, he'd driven the figure to their knees. They started to look up at him, but Clay knocked the figure over the back of the head with his lightsaber before they could speak. They collapsed to the ground.

Clay wasn't a killer.

Some sixth sense suddenly screamed danger, and Clay whirled around. Another figure stood on the wall of the courtyard above Tubbo, readying a long, sleek spear. Anger exploded in Clay's chest, and he blasted the figure away with a Force push.

Another Force presence appeared, and Clay turned once again. Two figures were slinking out of the flames, bent low, with hands wrapped around expertly-crafted weapons.

They weren't going to stop until Clay and Tubbo were dead, were they?

"Master?"

Tubbo's broken voice was loud in the silent courtyard. Clay glanced over his shoulder and found a pair of teary, blue eyes gazing back at him.

"What's happening?" Tubbo croaked.

Clay cracked a small smile. "Don't worry about it, Tubbo. Just go back to sleep. I'll be over there in a second."

The two figures attacked.

Once those two assassins were down, more appeared. Wave after wave flooded the courtyard, seemingly endless. Seconds faded into uncountable minutes as Clay downed enemy after enemy. Each one that fell seemed to instantly be replaced by another. His arms wavered, his legs shook, and his lungs screamed, but Clay didn't hesitate.

The fire brought back terrible memories. With each swing of his lightsaber, images from the First Temple Siege swam before Clay's eyes. He remembered the pain that ripped his chest apart and the despair of seeing Bad fall in front of him.

He hadn't been able to protect his friends. George had ended up saving them, even after all the Order had put him through. How on earth would Clay be able to do any better now?

Another assassin crumpled to the ground in an unconscious heap.

No. Even if Clay had the strength to save all his friends now, it was out of his hands. They were scattered across the Temple, and the only person left with him was Tubbo. Maybe Clay couldn't save everyone. Maybe he wasn't as strong as everyone told him he was.

But by all the gods, he *would* save his padawan.

Clay quickly lost track of time. He simply existed in a state of perpetual motion, leveling his lightsaber against every assassin that charged from the darkness. They didn't stop coming, but neither did Clay fall. The Force lent his body the strength it needed to stay on its feet.

A pile of unconscious bodies gathered around Clay's feet. Some he knew were dead as he couldn't be gentle with everyone. But he prayed that most of them were still alive.

How long had he been fighting? Was the rest of the Temple even standing?

It didn't matter. Tubbo was the only one that mattered.

And then, it happened. Clay struck an assassin across the face and immediately prepared for another blow. But he found no one there. The courtyard was empty. Clay spun in a quick circle, confirming that no one else was sneaking out from the shadows. But there really was no one there. He and Tubbo were finally alone.

It took Clay a couple of seconds to reorient himself. He slowly released the death grip he'd developed on his lightsaber, blinking rapidly. Gods, his head was spinning.

*Tubbo.*

Clay whirled around. Tubbo was still in the dirt, eyes closed, arm clutched to his chest. Clay dropped to his knees and desperately pressed his fingers to Tubbo's neck.

*Oh, gods, please...*

A steady pulse pumped back at him.

A relieved sob slipped through Clay's lips before he could stop it. "Thank you," he mumbled aloud. His tongue was thick with smoke and ash. "I'm right here, Tubbo. We're getting out of here."

For what he prayed was the last time, Clay carefully picked up his unconscious padawan and shuffled into the smoke. After what felt like a brief eternity, Clay finally emerged into clear air. And, to his relief, he was greeted with a different scene. The Temple was no longer roared with purple fire. Cargo ships were visible in the sky, and suppressant poured from their hulls. All around the Temple, buildings were clearly destroyed, but most structures still stood tall.

The Second Temple Siege was over.

"It's over, Tubbo," Dream murmured. He closed his eyes for a moment and listened to his padawan's shallow breathing. "You're safe. It's all over."

Clay opened his eyes and began hobbling through the wreckage.

Not a minute later, a familiar mess of black hair came flying into view.

"Clay!" Nick bellowed. His face was twisted with worry, and his Force presence was a blurry mess of emotions. "Thank the fucking gods! I didn't know where you were, and I was trying to- gods, I'm really happy to see you again!"

Clay very nearly sobbed. "I'm glad you're alive, too," he said with a shaky laugh. Nick started to open his arms for a hug (which Clay desperately wanted to accept), but Clay took a step back. "I have to get Tubbo to the infirmary. His arm is broken."

Nick froze, and his eyes widened when he saw the bone sticking out of Tubbo's upper arm. "Oh, yeah, that's... that's not good," he mumbled. "Okay, uhh, come on. I can guide you there."

Clay couldn't even express his gratitude. But, if Nick's soft smile was anything to go by, the shorter man heard him all the same.

Now that he was out of the smoke and haze (and could actually see the sky again), Clay's body was starting to give out on him. His legs threatened mutiny as he walked, and Tubbo was somehow heavier than he'd been before. But Clay didn't say anything. Their bond was still bright and active, and that was more than reason enough for Clay to stay on his feet a little longer.

A couple of minutes away from the infirmary, he and Nick were stopped again.

All Clay was aware of was a strong Force presence, then an incomprehensible scream. Clay winced, looked around, and found George flying out of another courtyard.

"*Nick!*" George shouted. He crashed into said Jedi Knight, and the two locked in a tight bear hug. "Gods, are you okay?" George continued, once he and Nick broke apart. "I felt you somewhere over here, but I was worried that you'd-"

Nick put up a hand, interrupting George's nervous rambling. "I'm fine," he chuckled. "I didn't get any bombs under my feet, and most of the fighting was done by the time I got out here."

George deflated with relief, and Clay smiled tiredly. It made him happy to see George and Nick together again. Despite how much they argued, the two of them had always been close. They were brothers, finally reunited.

Then George's gaze turned to Clay, and the shorter man's Force presence was engulfed in relief. "Clay," George breathed. Hearing his name like *that* sent shivers down Clay's spine, but he ignored the feeling. His first priority was his padawan. After a moment, George's eyes landed on Tubbo, and he put a hand over his mouth. "What happened?"

“Broken arm,” Clay recited, and he silently wondered how many times he'd have to repeat himself. “Is the infirmary safe? Like, it's not on fire?”

George frowned. “Yeah. But you won't be able to get in right now. There's a hostage situation with one of the patients. The guards won't tell me anything, so I left to look for help.”

For a split second, dread colored Clay's mind. Then the pieces clicked together, and he smiled faintly. “Is Techno there?” he asked.

George's frown deepened. “Yes.”

“Then the situation's probably over. Come on.”

Clay ignored George and Nick's identical stares of disbelief and shuffled past them, carefully stepping over a tipped planter. He and Techno were different in most ways. They fought over just about every rule in the book, and their styles of fighting couldn't be further apart. But, in some crucial areas, Clay and Techno were identical.

If the people Techno loved were in danger, the pig Jedi would move entire planets out of orbit to protect them.

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Techno squinted at the tiny characters scribbled across the page. “This is stupid,” he muttered. “I don't even know Kel Dor. How is this supposed to help?” He sighed heavily, then glanced across the arena. “George, can you read Kel Dor?”

From where he was warming up, George shouted back: “What the fuck is Kel Dor? Is that a language?”

“Great,” Techno mumbled. He stared at the page for a moment longer, then tucked the little book back into his robes. He'd figured out what the passage meant later. “Okay,” Techno called, getting to his feet. “How do you feel?”

George jogged across the arena with a bright grin. “Amazing,” he chuckled. “I can't believe that warming up makes such a difference. I wish someone would have told me last week.”

Techno couldn't help a slight smile. “I would have, but they wouldn't let me talk to you before our fight.”

“Sure. Like you'd help *me*.”

“I'm a nice guy, sometimes.”

It was an odd situation. Yesterday, George had messaged him, asking if his offer still stood. At first, Techno had almost said, “No, too late, please go away.” But he'd swallowed his nerves and agreed, and they'd ended up with a very productive afternoon. Coming back for a second session wasn't as hard as Techno had thought it'd be.

And, perhaps even more surprisingly, he and George were actually a compatible pair. After four years left to their own devices, they'd both mellowed out.

Strange how life worked.

“Okay, first thing I wanna talk about,” Techno began. He drew his lightsaber and held it out in

front of him. "What's going on with your grip?"

"My grip?" George parroted. He frowned, pulling his lightsaber from his belt and holding it out like Techno was. "What's wrong with it?"

Techno examined the shorter man's hands for a minute. "I don't know," he admitted. "Give me a minute here." After a couple more seconds of investigation, Techno's brain finally provided him with a reason. "Oh, I get it. Are you right-handed?"

"No. I just like being able to fight both ways."

"Well, at the moment, you can't even fight one way. Switch hands and hold it like you're supposed to. That's probably why some of your strokes are awkward."

When George didn't move, Techno switched the shorter man's grip himself. For a moment, George just swung his lightsaber experimentally. Then he gave Techno a sheepish grin.

"That does feel better," the engineer admitted.

Techno inclined his head. "Believe it or not, I actually do know what I'm talking about. Okay, follow me."

Techno wandered into the center of the arena, and, to his relief, George dutifully followed him. Techno was, in fact, very nervous about teaching someone. But he prayed that none of his nerves showed.

"Okay, see these circles?" Techno asked once he and George stood in the center of the arena. "These circles" were a series of three rings that were carved into the floor. "They're the Three Rings of Defense. D'you remember anything about the Rings from your padawan training?"

George hesitated. "No," he said eventually. "I'm amazed I remember anything technical about Ataru, to be honest."

Techno made a mental note of that, then pressed on with the speech he'd constructed before their session. "Doesn't matter, you don't have to. Stand in the middle."

George did. Techno drew his lightsaber and swung it in a long, slow arc. George lifted his lightsaber to catch the blow, and Techno pointed at the shorter man's hand.

"Okay, you see how far you're reaching to parry? You're in the Outer Ring when you should be in the Middle Ring. Move your arm closer to your body. No, no, not that close; you're gonna kill yourself. Right- there you go. Okay, now deflect my swing again."

Techno put pressure on their connected blades, and George slid the lightsabers apart like he'd been doing it his whole life. Techno allowed himself a faint smile.

"How'd that feel?" he asked.

"Better," George murmured. He sounded somewhere between astonished and amused. "Is it really that simple? Just learning what ring to deflect blows in?"

"Oh, no, you attack differently from each ring. Here, stand right there."

For the next fifteen minutes, they worked solely on George's situational awareness. Techno was stressed the entire time, but George seemed perfectly content to relearn the technicalities of



lightsaber fighting. Which was a relief to Techno. He had no idea how to teach flashy moves or elaborate strings of combat.

Finally, George called for a break. Techno obliged, and the two of them returned to their things. George took a long draft of water, so Techno settled himself on the bench to wait.

“Do you not need water?” George asked after a moment's silence. “I've been back for a while now, and I've never seen you drink anything.”

Techno eyed the water bottle in the shorter man's hands. “No, I still need it,” he muttered. “Just not as much as you do.”

In truth, Techno usually just forgot to drink water throughout the day. But George seemed to take that as a reasonable answer and went back to his drink. Techno gazed around the arena placidly. He wasn't really looking for anything; it was just a habit he'd developed after so many years of missions with Phil.

Phil. Gods.

Over the past couple of days, Techno had generally avoided thinking about his partner. It wasn't good for his mental health, and if he thought about Phil for too long, Techno couldn't keep himself from wandering down to the infirmary.

There he went, thinking again. Techno physically shook his head and went back to scanning.

That was when he felt it. A rumble spread through the arena like a deadly wave, and every one of Techno's instincts went on high alert. Where was it? There, focused in the center of the arena. Short bursts, slowly getting longer, with an undertone of vibration that was abnormally strong.

Techno knew that sound.

“Move!” he bellowed. Techno launched himself to his feet and grabbed George's wrist, sprinting for the exit. He ignored George's protests, only pulling the shorter man along faster.

They couldn't make it, and Techno knew it. As soon as they reached the ramp that led out of the arena, Techno pressed himself against the wall, forcing George to do the same.

The arena exploded.

Techno had been around enough explosions to know to slacken his jaw and brace himself against the wall. That's precisely what he did, and had there only been a bomb planted in the center of the arena, he and George would have been fine. But before the shockwaves of the first had settled, a second bomb exploded at the top of the ramp. Techno didn't even have time to shout.

The sound of crashing stones filled Techno's ears. He threw his arms over his head and prayed that maybe, just once, the gods would take pity on him.

As it turned out, they would.

Once the rumbling had finally faded, Techno opened his eyes. He was greeted with nothing but pitch darkness. This was a good thing since it meant he was alive, but it was also a problem. Techno was either blind or trapped. What had happened?

“George?” Techno called hesitantly.

After a couple of breathless moments, George's voice came from somewhere to Techno's left.

"I'm here. I'm okay."

Techno breathed a silent sigh of relief, then stretched his hands out around him. Behind him was a solid wall (he could feel cement lines), and in front of him was... nothing. Techno took a tiny step forward. His hands immediately met a jagged edge, and Techno winced as blood began to drip from his fingers. They seemed to be trapped underneath a mixture of rubble and rocks.

*Not good, Techno thought. We're gonna run out of oxygen soon unless there are some holes somewhere.*

A hand suddenly landed on Techno's arm. He reminded himself that George was still with him and dismissed his nerves as soon as they appeared. George did not seem to get the "chill" memo, and the engineer let out a bloodcurdling shriek.

"Fuck, sorry," George mumbled. "I thought- never mind."

"Don't worry about it," Techno said. He was proud that his voice didn't betray his frantic heartbeat. "Okay, uh... not sure if you figured it out, but we're trapped."

"Yeah, got that. I'm kind of claustrophobic."

*Me too, Techno thought hysterically. But if ever there was a time to act like Phil, it was now. He couldn't just dismantle the rocks, one by one, because he and George would be crushed as soon as the supports were gone. Similarly, blasting their way out was out of the picture. Maybe he could cut a hole for them?*

...or Techno could make this a learning experience.

"How comfortable are you with using the Force?" Techno asked.

"What?"

Techno didn't need to see George's face to know that the shorter man was staring at him.

"Can you move anything?" Techno prompted. "Can you grab your lightsaber if you drop it? Jump really high? Uh, move a chair?"

George was quiet for a moment. "No. Well, I don't think I can. But I'm really good with mental shields, emotions, and Force lightning, apparently."

Either George was purposefully dodging Techno's point, or he genuinely didn't get it. Either way, he wasn't panicking, and that was what Techno needed.

"Okay, that's better than nothing," Techno muttered. "I want you to move these rocks."

He was met with dead silence.

"What?" George croaked, after an unbearable long pause.

Techno shrugged, then realized the engineer couldn't see him. "I want you to move these rocks," Techno repeated. "Look, you're like a Force magnet. If you focus, you got this. Easy." His breath came harder than it should have. Either the cramped space was getting to him, or they were quickly running out of fresh air. Neither option was helpful.

Just as Techno was starting to worry that the engineer had passed out without him noticing, George spoke again.

“Okay. I’ll try my best.”

George’s Force presence suddenly grew stronger, and Techno spread his fingers a little, adding his support to the rocks. Chances were, the engineer was strong enough to move the entire pile of rubble by himself. But he didn’t yet have the control to do so, and Techno didn’t want to be accidentally crushed.

After a couple of seconds, the sound of something crashing to the ground reached Techno’s ears. George let out a shaky exhale.

“That was hard,” the shorter man said weakly. “Are you sure I should be doing this, Techno?”

Techno made sure that his lattice of Force support still held up the rocks, then spoke. “Yeah, you’re doing fine,” he said. He tried his best to emulate the way Phil sounded when he talked to a nervous youngling. “Just trust yourself.”

*Just trust yourself.* Gods, maybe Techno had knocked his head during the explosion.

Another piece of rubble hit the ground with a crash. Then what felt like a giant hand pressed against the rocks. Techno carefully removed his support, and to his relief, nothing collapsed. In fact, quite the opposite happened. Everything started to shift. A couple of rocks in front of Techno moved apart and created an opening that was just big enough for a person.

Techno squeezed through the gap without a second thought. He took a gasping breath of fresh air. Oh, sweet salvation.

The sound of another landslide roared behind him. Techno whirled around, and for a terrible second, he thought that George had crushed himself. But no, the engineer was fine. George stood in front of the pile of rubble, face ashen, panting heavily.

“That was good,” Techno said, deadpan. “I’m thinking next time you could try lifting all the rocks at once.”

The hint of a grin touched George’s face. “Fuck off, Technoblade.”

The ground suddenly rumbled, interrupting their moment. Techno switched back into combat mode and sprinted out of the arena. Yes, a bomb had gone off and nearly killed them, but why was the Temple still shaking? What else was going on?

Techno made it out of the arena and turned. His blood ran cold.

Purple fire rose in terrible pillars. Some courtyards were already consumed, and a couple of buildings were licked by violet flames. The fire didn’t seem to be as corrosive as it had been during its last appearance, but normal fire was just as deadly.

Another tremor wracked the Temple. From his vantage point, Techno watched an entire courtyard be engulfed in a plume of smoke.

*It’s happening again,* Techno thought dully. *How’d they get bombs in here? How’d we not notice that?*

A nearby building suddenly cracked into two, and the deafening sound brought Techno out of his

head.

“George, we have to go!” he bellowed.

The engineer immediately appeared at the ramp, hobbling his way out of the arena. George was still pale and clearly unsteady on his feet, but his eyes were alert.

“What's going on?” George demanded.

Techno didn't stop to explain the situation. He grabbed the engineer by the sleeve and took off towards the infirmary.

If anything happened to Phil... if one more gods-damned tragedy befell him...

The next couple of minutes passed in a blur. Techno and George sprinted through the Temple grounds, dodging huge pits of purple fire and avoiding the chunks of falling rubble. It was a child's worst nightmare come to life, but Techno didn't stop. Other people could deal with all the damage. *He had to get to Phil.*

As Techno guided them through a particularly hazy courtyard, he suddenly picked out another presence hidden in the smoke. Techno froze, looked around, then dove behind a low wall. To his relief, George didn't make a sound.

For a couple of seconds, the air was quiet. Then a figure slid from the smoke. Their footfalls were silent, and their gaze carried a predator's intensity.

Techno made his decision in a fraction of a second. He rose from the bush and swung his lightsaber down towards the figure's shoulder. To their credit, they managed to catch his blow. But their sloppy deflection allowed Techno to step in close and ram his elbow into the figure's face. They let out a pained gasp. Techno drove his lightsaber into the figure's temple, and they collapsed in a heap.

“That's not good,” Techno mumbled aloud.

“Are they dead?”

George stood in the middle of the walkway, staring down at the figure with horrified eyes. The engineer looked like he was about to be sick.

“No, just unconscious,” Techno murmured. “Come on.”

Techno slapped a set of cuffs onto the unknown person's wrists, then took off running once again. This time, Techno kept a constant eye out for any more dark-clothed people. But that was difficult with George in tow. The fear and anxiety that rolled off the engineer were debilitating, and it took all of Techno's mental fortitude not to be affected.

*He'll be fine,* Techno reassured himself.

...and he'd keep telling himself that until George was fine again.

Techno and George finally exited the last courtyard and found the infirmary still standing. For a second, Techno was relieved. Then he realized the flashes of light that colored the sky weren't from the fire – they were from lightsabers. All around the infirmary, Jedi fought with figures in dark linen, just like the one Techno had left behind.

He was so close. These people couldn't stop him.

“Come on!” Techno barked. He drew his lightsaber and rushed into battle. At least, he tried. He was stopped by a hand on his arm and forcibly dragged back.

“Are you insane?” George hissed, pulling them both into the shadows. “You're shaking, Techno, don't think I didn't notice! We should leave this to those Jedi!”

Techno's patience finally broke. He grabbed George's shoulders and shook the shorter man. “I know you're scared,” he snapped. “I am, too. This is a nightmare, but 'those Jedi?' They need my help. And no, I'm not trying to be a hero, George, I'm just protecting the people I care about.”

George hesitated. Techno saw the trauma in the engineer's eyes, the nightmares that plagued his sleep, the crippling fear of *himself*. Oh, how Techno knew it well.

“Look...” Techno sighed, and he loosened his grip on George's shoulders. “I don't care that you've killed people. I have, too. And this-” Techno held up his lightsaber. “-is the price I have to pay for it. I'm not a saint. But I'm still here, and until they kick me out, I'm a Jedi. I don't have to kill people to defend this Temple.”

For the first time, George seemed to really see Techno's blood-red lightsaber. The engineer's eyes widened.

*Yeah. I'm just like you.*

“Stay here if you have to,” Techno said quietly. “Just make your choice and stick to it.”

He released George's shoulders and launched into the fray. As a new player in an ongoing fight, Techno made short work of the first couple of dark-clothed figures. But he was quickly identified as the biggest threat. Within moments, Techno found himself attacked from all sides.

He didn't want to kill anyone. But he didn't contain himself, and he scythed through his assailants with vicious precision. Cutting off a limb was just as effective as killing someone.

But it wasn't enough. For each attacker Techno put down, more seemed to appear. All around him, the other Jedi were starting to waver, and it was only a matter of time before they got overrun. Was this it? Was this how the Jedi would finally be snuffed out?

*“Techno!”*

Techno immediately recognized the shout. He glanced over his shoulder and across the raging battlefield, Eret met his gaze. Techno's heart sank.

*Now?*

Eret nodded.

Techno took a deep breath, then settled himself into a state of calm. The Force began pumping through his veins, and after a moment, Eret's Force presence lit up like a beacon in his mind. Techno shoved his lightsaber into his belt and raced for the other Jedi. Eret was already doing the same, hand outstretched.

They met halfway. Their gloved hands met, and for the first time since Phil's attack, Techno truly opened himself up to the Force. Eret's anger washed around him like a dark ocean. The other Jedi Master was furious that these people continued to attack the Temple. Techno accepted Eret's fury

and thought, *I'm going to enjoy this.*

Juyo and Vaapad sang in deadly harmony. An incredible spark of power bloomed in Techno's chest, and he shoved out of his body with all the might he could muster.

The effects were devastating. A Force wave erupted from Techno and Eret, tearing through the battlefield like an angry spirit. Each of the dark-clothed figures was picked off their feet and tossed aside, crashed into whatever solid object they happened to hit first. The Jedi were untouched.

For as powerful as the results were, the consequences were just as devastating. Techno released Eret's hand and immediately stumbled over to the nearest planter, nausea driving him to his knees. He retched into the bushes, his head spinning wildly. Once he could finally see straight again, Techno glanced at Eret. The other Jedi was already looking back at him with a pale face.

Years ago, the two of them had decided to only combine forces when things were at their most desperate.

A couple of minutes later, the fight was over. Jedi rounded up the few conscious intruders and cuffed the unconscious ones. No more bombs went off, and no more dark-clothed figures materialized from thin air. Techno confirmed with several other Jedi that, yes, the siege was over. As he walked around, he saw George helping a tall Jedi cuff one of the rogues.

The sight made Techno feel strangely proud. *Looks like you didn't run.*

“Technoblade!”

Techno turned at the shout. Rhodys was striding up to him, a scowl twisting their face.

“What's wrong?” Techno asked.

Rhodys sighed, their reptilian eyes briefly fluttering closed. “There's a hostage in there,” they said tiredly. “That's why all of the infirmary workers are out here with us. They escaped after the hostage-taker made herself known, and that's when this attack began. They're lucky that there were a couple of Jedi nearby.”

Techno suddenly noticed the abnormal amount of infirmary workers milling around the field. He'd thought they were just there to check on the Jedi.

“Who's the hostage?”

“Don't know. The workers say that she blocked herself into an empty wing after threatening them all with some sort of poisonous dart.”

A cold pit formed in Techno's stomach. “She?”

“Yes, she. That was all the workers could tell us. They *were* a bit rushed.”

Fear, rage, and worry weighed on Techno's shoulders like an anvil. “She isn't in an empty ward,” he said quietly. “That's Phil's ward. She's taken Phil hostage.”

Rhodys' eyes widened, and they turned away, letting out a string of quiet Trandosha curses.

In that split second, Techno came up with one of the worst plans he'd ever considered. But it was the only option he had left, and Techno was... tired. He was tired of fighting for his life, tired of seeing his friends hurt, tired of always walking on thin ice. The gods themselves couldn't stop him

anymore.

“Get me a tracker,” Techno said.

Rhodys frowned. “A tracker?”

“Yeah, a tracker. The one you use to monitor people's heartbeats. One of these workers has got to have one.”

Rhodys stopped one of the nearby nurses and had a quick conversation. Sure enough, they returned a moment later with a pill-sized tracker in hand. Techno accepted it, tugged off his right boot, and dropped the tracker in.

“I don't suppose you're going to explain what you're doing?” Rhodys asked slowly.

*Being an idiot*, Techno thought. “I'm going in,” he said aloud. “If she's taken Phil, she wants me, too. There's a safety hatch hidden over his ward. Once I break in, I'm gonna crush the tracker, and it'll stop sending my vitals. That's your cue to break in through the front. She probably won't notice you if she's talking to me.”

Rhodys blinked. “That's brilliant.”

Techno chuckled humorlessly and headed for the infirmary. “Yeah, well, Phil and I have spent a lot of time in the Underworld. You kinda have to get creative.”

Without another word, Techno launched himself up to said hatch. It was a secret pane of glass hidden by a plate of metal. As Techno had observed over the years, every ward in the infirmary had a secret exit. *Here goes nothing*. Techno drove his lightsaber into the metal, then tore the plate away. It only took a single hit of his elbow to shatter the glass.

Techno dropped inside.

The ward was dark. Most of the room's electronics were turned off, and only a single strip light on the floor still flickered. The windows were unceremoniously boarded up with metal frames, blankets, and mattresses.

“I knew you'd show up eventually, Master Technoblade.”

A tall figure stood next to Phil's bed.

“I'm very predictable,” Techno said, drawing his lightsaber. “What do you want?”

“I've already gotten what I want.” The doctor stepped into the light, and she gave Techno a magnanimous smile. “You didn't suspect me?” she asked lightly. “Not even for a moment? It's a shame. I thought you were smarter. Well, this just proves that the Order should use more medical droids and less sentient beings. It's a pleasure, Master Technoblade. My name is Belrain.”

Techno didn't respond. He'd met this type of person a thousand times before. They wanted to have their little speech, a moment of grandeur, and then see their adversary fall apart.

“It's been wonderful to treat Master Philza here,” Belrain continued. She gently patted the stump of Phil's left shoulder, and anger touched Techno's mind. “He really is quite a fighter. It took much stronger doses than I expected to keep him under. I almost ran out.”

...what?

Belrain turned back to Techno, and she broke out in a grin once again. “Have you figured it out yet, Master Technoblade? Do you understand what's going to happen to your partner?”

Techno did. Even as far away as he was, he could see the telltale puncture marks on Phil's neck. When the bandages for his neck wound had been on, no one would have noticed. Techno hadn't even noticed. And now-

*No.*

“Hands up,” Techno snapped. He advanced on the doctor, readying his lightsaber. “By mandate of the-”

Belrain let out a hearty laugh, which was enough to slow Techno's steps. Was there something else he'd missed? Something would change the situation?

“I don't care if you arrest me,” Belrain called, still laughing. “I've already won. Today, the Order loses one of its best Jedi.”

Techno froze.

The doctor tsked lightly, wagging a finger. “Did you really think he'd make it?” she chuckled. “Look at his vitals. Look at *him*. Between the poison, the infection, or shock, he's going to die, Master Technoblade. You should already know that.”

Logically, Techno knew that Belrain was just trying to rile him up. There was every possibility that Phil was okay and that she was bluffing.

But their bond said differently. Techno felt Phil's pain as if it was his own, felt the poison that ate away at his partner's mind.

*Phil was dying.*

For a moment, Techno felt nothing. Then he felt everything, and every emotion that had ravaged his mind over the past couple of days came flooding back. It was as if Techno's very soul was tearing apart, ripping the rest of his body apart with it.

Did he run? Did he fight? Gods, was Phil really going to die? And Techno, he-

The doctor laughed again. Slowly, with the endless rage of a dying star, Techno leveled a stare at the woman.

“And do you know what's the icing on the cake for me?” Belrain asked brightly. “I'm going to live a better life in prison than Master Philza will until he dies! Isn't the Jedi Order wonderful?”

*You shouldn't be allowed to live. You should be put in a bed and left to rot. You should wither away to nothing without anyone around to hear your screams.*

“I wonder if he'll suffer... oh, I don't have to wonder! I know! He will feel as if he's being strung limb from limb! Neurochemical poisons really are the most inhumane things that the collective scientific world ever invented.”

*Your life is meaningless in the face of his. You're less than human. You should be put down like an animal.*

“Have you ever planned a funeral, Master Technoblade? I haven't. I imagine it would be very



challenging, especially so soon after the death of a loved one. You *must* let me know how it goes."

***You deserve to die, you deserve to die, you deserve to die, you deserve-***

Belrain suddenly stooped, gently kissing Phil's forehead. "Sleep well, Master Philza," she cooed.

The world narrowed down to nothing except the woman standing over Phil. Techno's body moved without his permission, but he didn't care. It was a perfect shot. Techno's lightsaber would fit perfectly between her fifth and sixth ribs. He could already hear the sound it'd make.

***DIE.***

The doctor looked up, and her face broke out in a triumphant grin.

Techno's lightsaber sliced into the foot of Phil's bed. It shaved off a layer of metal and flung the piece away, sending it to the floor with a deafening clatter.

Belrain's face creased with sudden confusion. "What are you doing?" she demanded. "Let me die! Kill me for what I've done!"

Techno stared at the doctor. She was clouded by tears. Was she crying? No... he was crying.

"No," Techno rasped, his voice trembling. "That's not the Jedi Way. By-" Techno swallowed thickly. "By mandate of the Jedi Order, I arrest you for attempted murder against a Jedi Master and High Councilman. Do you resist this sentence?"

Belrain's face contorted in rage. "You're not a Jedi!" she shouted. "Kill me!"

Techno glanced down at Phil. His partner's face was pale.

*"Kill him, or I will!"*

"Do you resist?" Techno repeated.

Belrain lunged at him with a furious roar. Techno simply stepped aside and tripped her as she flew past, sending the woman tumbling to the ground. At the same moment, the door to the ward burst open. Techno looked up and found a team of Jedi standing in the doorway.

"She's the only one in here," Techno called. "I think it's clear. You might wanna check the other rooms, though."

The leading Jedi said something to her fellows, and a couple of them scattered. The remaining five came jogging over to Techno and the unconscious Belrain.

"Are you hurt, Technoblade?" the leading Jedi, a Twi'lek, asked.

Techno smiled weakly. "No. Get her out of here, and, uh... you might wanna get a couple of those nurses in here. See if you can do anything for Phil. He, uh..." Techno fought back the tears that pricked at his eyes. "Just see how he's doing, all that."

The Twi'lek Jedi seemed to understand Techno's unspoken message, and she nodded slightly. "Very well. You may have a moment with him. After that, we'll need you to leave while we clear the rest of the building."

"That's fine."

The Twi'lek jerked her head at the other Jedi, and they swept out of the room, two of them carrying Belrain.

Techno looked down at Phil once again. His partner looked terrible. In the few days Techno had kept himself away from the infirmary, Phil's skin had become ghostly white, and his hair looked greasy.

"I'm sorry I wasn't here," Techno murmured. His tongue was thick, but... this might be the last chance Techno got. He sank to the bed. "I should have seen what she was doing to you," he said quietly. "I was scared, and..."

Phil's pulse was weak and fluttery.

There was so much that Techno had never said. "I'm sorry," he mumbled. Tears clouded his vision. "For never saying thank you. You believed in me, you fought for me, and... I never said anything. Thank you for saving my life. Thank you for keeping me here. I-"

Techno's voice broke. He paused, trying to put himself back together. It didn't work.

Phil was dying.

"Why didn't you give up?" Techno whispered. "Why'd you think that I had anything good left in me?"

There was nothing Techno could do to save him.

"I was... gone. Why'd you even try?"

He was going to lose his closest friend.

Slowly, Techno pulled off his gloves. He put a gentle hand over the puncture wounds on Phil's neck and closed his eyes. Their bond was so weak, he could barely feel Phil's presence. But it was all that Techno had left. He gathered all the joy, all the hope, all the love that Phil had given him and pressed it back into their bond. He expressed all the words he couldn't find and the sorrow that turned him into nothing but a shell of himself.

For just a moment, their bond glowed.

Then it settled back into a faint light.

Techno stood. He could feel the infirmary workers returning, and he didn't want to be a sobbing mess. When the nurses arrived at the ward, Techno greeted them with a curt nod, silently accepting the bacta patch that one of them handed him as he left.

Time blurred into a mess of impressionistic brush strokes. Techno left the infirmary and sat beneath a nearby tree, staring at nothing. He couldn't even tell if he was thinking or not. He just... existed.

Techno was finally pulled from his thoughts when someone called his name. He blinked several times, startled by the sudden mental stimulation, and looked around. Who had-?

"Techno!"

It was Dream. The other Jedi was hobbling out of a courtyard, George and Sapnap hot on his tail.

"Hey," Techno said blankly. Suddenly, he realized that Dream cradled Tubbo in his arms, and the

haze in Techno's head cleared a little. "What happened?" he demanded, clambering to his feet.

Dream stumbled to a stop. "Broken arm," he said breathlessly. "Is the-"

"Yeah, it's safe," Techno said. He waved a hand towards the infirmary and ignored the pang of agony that came with looking at the shining spire. "Go. There has to be an open bacta tank."

Dream inclined his head a little (a silent "thank you"), then raced into the infirmary. George and Sapnap also spared Techno a grateful look as they followed their party's leading member into the infirmary.

It was good that George was back. The three of them functioned best as a team.

The Dream Team. Heh. Techno had to suggest that to Dream sometime.

"Techno!"

*Someone else needs me?* Techno wondered. He looked around again, and this time, he found Tommy and Wilbur charging towards him.

"Techno, you're alright!" Tommy repeated, a huge smile lighting up his face.

"I was fucking worried about you!" Wilbur shouted at the same time.

Master and Padawan skidded to a stop in front of Techno. Tommy reached out, clearly planning to give him a hug, then froze and recoiled. Techno gazed at the two of them for a moment. Both were pale, and it was clear that they'd been running around for a while.

They'd truly been worried about him.

"Come here," Techno mumbled.

He opened his arms, and without a second of hesitation, Tommy and Wilbur tackled him in a dual bear hug.

The usual fire of physical contact spread under Techno's skin, and his instincts screamed for him to *get away from whoever was touching him*. Techno ignored the urge and hugged his friends tighter.

Tommy and Wilbur were both vibrant in Techno's mind.

They were a stark contrast to Phil's dim glow.

Silent tears slid down Techno's cheeks.

## Chapter End Notes

I don't know what to tell you, either.

Thank you all so much for reading! Please leave a comment if you're so inclined, and I hope you enjoyed this arc! :D

I have to say, all the love and support that y'all have shown me makes me so, so happy. Your comments and praise (and the fact that you come back every week!) are

just mind-blowing. From the bottom of my heart, thank you. You've made an aspiring author very, very happy <3

I know, I know. That was some sappy "end of the story" stuff, but I thought that y'all deserve to know how much you mean to me. Don't worry, though! This story still isn't over! And no, I won't tell you how many arcs there's gonna be lol

With this being the end of Jericho, I'm going to take a two-week break to get ready for the next arc and have a bit of personal time. Since two Fridays from now lands on Christmas, you'll see me the Saturday after Christmas (26th)! It'll be like a late Christmas present!

No matter what you celebrate or if you don't celebrate at all, I hope you have a wonderful December. See you on the 26th!

(P.S. If you catch the s7 Darth Maul quote that I put in this chapter, please tell me, I need to give you a hug.)

# Depths of the Earth, Part 1

## Chapter Notes

Hello, everyone! My apologies for returning a day late; the holidays were a little more hectic than I'd expected lol. But I'm here now, and god, I am so excited for this next arc! I can't wait to share the next piece of the story! Let me tell you, this chapter was so much fun for so many reasons. I really hope y'all enjoy it as much as I did!

(Fyi, I have an announcement to make about the previous arcs, but for the sake of a short starting note, that will be at the end of this update.)

Welcome to Depths of the Earth!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Clay gently brushed Tubbo's fringe aside, pressing the back of his hand to his padawan's clammy forehead. "At least you're not running a fever anymore," he murmured to the sleeping boy. "You had us worried."

Tubbo didn't respond.

*"Master Dream."*

Clay glanced over his shoulder and found a medical droid hovering in the doorway. Despite the droid looking identical to every single one that wandered around the infirmary, something about it seemed familiar. Maybe Tubbo had pointed it out to Clay at some point. Regardless, Clay cracked a small smile and asked, "Am I in your way?"

The droid nodded stiffly. *"Yes, Master Dream. If you'd please move aside, I will give Padawan Tubbo his hourly injection. It will not take long."*

Clay obediently got to his feet. However, he didn't move more than a few steps away. If the droid so much as laid a finger on Tubbo the wrong way, Clay was going to rip its arms off.

A hot drip of anger pooled in Clay's stomach. He took a deep breath and tried to let the emotion slip into the Force, but it didn't quite work. Rage still licked the corners of his mind like the last coals of a dying fire.

Clay had been feeling a lot of that recently. It ranged from spikes of emotions that he couldn't control to unreasonable anger or frustration. At first, he'd attributed everything to a lack of sleep. But, given that it had been almost a week since the Second Temple Siege... temporary insomnia didn't seem to be the cause of his discontent.

Then again, Clay knew why he was never calm. But he didn't want to admit it, not even to himself.

*"All done, Master Dream,"* the droid reported. It pulled a needle from Tubbo's arm and shuffled aside, allowing Clay to sit next to his padawan once again. *"Would you like me to check your vitals while I'm here? Your heart rate seems to be elevated."*

Clay smiled thinly. "No, thank you. I'm fine."

If the droid could have shrugged or rolled its eyes, Clay was sure it would have done both. But the droid simply said, “*Of course, Master,*” and left the room. Clay watched it march through the door and disappear down the hallway. Once it was gone, he chuckled to himself.

“Yeah, I think that's the droid you liked,” Clay told Tubbo conspiratorially. “You remember it? It came by when you broke your finger. It probably thinks I'm a terrible Master.”

Tubbo still didn't respond.

Clay's heart twisted, and the words on the tip of his tongue died. Who was he kidding, trying to pretend that he was just keeping his padawan company in the infirmary? Logically, Clay knew that Tubbo still wasn't awake because the poor boy was exhausted. Also, Tubbo was allergic to most types of sedatives. The padawan could be working through allergies on top of everything else.

But too much had happened in the past few weeks for Clay to write it off as nothing.

A headache pricked at Clay's temples, and he scowled, pressing a thumb into the new sore spot. “I've been sitting here too long,” he muttered aloud. “Maybe I should order food.”

Tubbo's eyelids flickered, but other than that, he gave no signs of life.

Clay sighed heavily. Every time Tubbo had drifted back to consciousness, Clay had either been in another part of the Temple or asleep. When he'd demanded to know why Tubbo seemed to be avoiding him, the nurses had just shrugged helplessly and said that Tubbo was still recovering. The boy would fully wake up once his body was ready.

Was it infuriating? Yes. But Clay could be patient if it meant that his padawan was finally getting a well-deserved break.

That didn't mean that Clay wasn't ready to tear out his hair.

“You're not usually this stubborn,” Clay muttered. He grimaced, as he'd made a silent conviction to stop talking to his sleeping padawan, but the words would burn his throat should he keep them in any longer. “I mean, you kind of are. But... Tubbo, it's been days. You should be awake by now. Like, awake throughout the day, not just for an hour while I'm asleep. I-”

Footsteps suddenly approached the closed door, and Clay immediately cut himself off.

“Master Dream? Is Tubbo awake?”

One of the nurses must have heard him. Clay winced and responded, “No. He's still asleep. Do you need to check on him?”

“No, Master, I just thought...” A moment of silence. Then: “Let us know if you need anything. We're always here to retrieve whatever you need or send a message.”

*Quality customer service*, Clay thought dryly. “Thank you,” he called back. An idea suddenly occurred to him, and he added, “Actually, there is something you can do for me. Get a message to Knight Sarnap. Just tell him to get here as soon as he can.

“Of course, Master.”

The footsteps retreated, and Clay let out a silent breath of relief. “Thank the gods,” he muttered. “Guess I have to stop talking to you, huh?”

Tubbo's eyelids fluttered.

Being unconscious after a traumatic injury was nothing unusual. Poor Tubbo had broken his arm, then suffered through almost an hour's worth of smoke inhalation and noxious fumes. That wasn't even taking into account the shock his body had endured. Clay himself had passed out for five days after receiving the injuries that had given him the scars on his shoulders.

But that led back to the problem: it had been a week. One full week and Tubbo was still unconscious most of the time. Between special care from the droids (Clay had staunchly refused a living doctor after the Belrain incident) and the bacta treatment, Tubbo should be better.

"At least you're not running a fever," Clay muttered. He chuckled humorlessly and squeezed his padawan's hand. "I'm so sorry that you got stuck with me. I'm pretty sure that I passed you my curse of unluckiness."

Tubbo's fingers twitched just a little. It was enough to bring a smile to Clay's face.

For a couple of minutes, Clay sat there in silence. He examined Tubbo's vitals (which he'd learned to read within the first day of the padawan's bedrest), checked the pillows, and made sure that Tubbo's fever hadn't returned. Nothing was out of place. It was comforting that Tubbo slept so deeply, in a bittersweet sort of way. Gods knew that Clay hadn't gotten a good night of rest since the Second Temple Siege.

Footsteps suddenly approached the door again. A Force presence came with it, and it pressed gently against Clay's mind, distinctly orange with an undercurrent of fondness.

"Hey, Nick," Clay called. He straightened from his hunched position and waved the door open, allowing the younger man to step into the room. "That was fast. Sorry if I worried you or anything. I just wanted company."

Nick chuckled and joined Clay at Tubbo's bedside. "It's fine. I was already on my way here. The nurse was just about to send the message when I showed up."

"Why were you on your way here?" Clay asked hesitantly. "Was it to see me, or..."

"Yeah, it was to see you." The cheer melted from the younger man's face, and dread pooled in Clay's stomach. "Rhodys got a lead," Nick muttered. "Well, not directly, I guess. They got a call from one of their Underworld rats. You remember that spy that tailed Philza and Techno the last time they were down there? The kid showed up again. Level 3040, something like that."

Despite the worry that threatened to drown him, Clay cracked a small smile. "If their report was accurate, the 'kid' is probably as old as you," he noted.

Nick's glare held a hint of venom. "Okay, *rude*. You don't need to do me like that."

Clay chuckled weakly but didn't respond. He gave Tubbo's vitals a once-over, just to make sure that Tubbo hadn't died while he'd been distracted, then turned his attention back to Nick. "Why are you telling me? I mean, thanks for the update, but..."

Nick sighed heavily, and Clay's chest constricted.

"I fucking hate the task force," Nick mumbled. Before Clay could say anything, the younger man pressed on. "Rhodys is sending George down to investigate since he 'knows more about the Underworld than we ever will.'" Nick paused to roll his eyes. "Somehow, they got Cho-Nal and the rest of his merry idiots to agree. But George can't go alone. You're his partner, Clay. They want

you to go.”

“No,” Clay said before his brain could catch up. He sucked in a guilty breath and gave Nick an apologetic look. “I mean-”

But the Knight was already holding up his hands. “It's okay,” he said lightly. “That's what I told them you'd say, since, y'know, you *actually care* about your padawan. So, they made a compromise. If you refuse to go, they'll send me instead. Win-win, right?”

Again, Clay's knee-jerk reaction tried to press through his lips. *Yeah, sounds good. Be safe.* But Clay forced the words down and considered the two options. It was absolutely correct that he wanted to stay by Tubbo's bedside until his padawan recovered. But...

“Are you willing to go down there?” Clay asked quietly. “It's... it's not easy, Nick. The air alone is enough to kill a man. I mean, you saw what happened to-” A ball lodged in Clay's throat.

“Anyways. You're sure?”

Nick hesitated. It was only for a heartbeat, and the confident smile that the younger man plastered on his face a moment later was almost enough to mask the slip-up. But Clay had seen it.

“Yeah, I'll be fine,” Nick said. His voice didn't even waver. “Georgie and I will be fine.”

Clay let a tired smile creep onto his face. “No. You don't want to go.”

Nick's grin slipped away like melting ice. After a few moments, the younger man let out a heavy sigh and collapsed onto the visitor chair. The fact that Nick didn't argue the point was a testament to how much they had mended their friendship.

They sat in silence for a few minutes. Tubbo's hand rested limply in Clay's, and Clay gently brushed a thumb over the scar on Tubbo's knuckles. It was one of the few the padawan had. For a long time, Clay had joked that it would be the only one. But now, the bandages that wrapped around Tubbo's left bicep covered what would become another scar.

How many more attacks would it take until Tubbo was as scarred as Clay was? How many more attacks would befall them until Clay himself was nothing more than a mangled mess?

After all... Jedi had never been known for being very lucky.

“What does George think about all this?” Clay asked, breaking the silence.

Nick pinched the bridge of his nose. “He's being all Georgie about it,” he muttered. “Oh, yeah, I'll be fine, it's all good, I can go alone.' Bunch of bullshit, but he'll be fine no matter what we do. He's spent years down there. It's like going home to your family.”

Clay raised an eyebrow, even though Nick couldn't see it. “You're an orphan.”

“I've got you, don't I?”

Clay snorted and whacked Nick's arm. The younger man whined at the blow, but they were both smiling. They'd made a promise long ago to stick together until death did them part, and if Clay had anything to say about it, he'd keep that promise no matter what.

The memory of the pact turned Clay's thoughts dark once again. He'd made that same promise to Tubbo.



Suddenly, one of the panels next to Tubbo's bed beeped.

Clay jumped, startled, and frantically scanned the vitals. Gods, what now? Was Tubbo dying? Had something else gone horribly wrong and plunged his padawan into mortal danger?

No. Nothing was wrong. In fact, Tubbo's vitals were slowly rising back to normal levels.

Hope bloomed in Clay's chest like a spring flower. "Nick, get a nurse," he ordered. The younger man immediately leaped from his chair, and Clay turned his attention back to his padawan.

"Tubbo, can you hear me?"

For a heart-stopping moment, nothing happened. Then Tubbo's eyes slowly fluttered open, and Clay was blessed with the sight of innocent, blue eyes.

"I take it that it's not 2 in the morning," Tubbo rasped, the barest hint of a smile pulling at his mouth.

Clay felt like he could have flown. "No, it's 5 pm," he said as cheerfully as he could. A ball of emotions stuck in his throat and Clay tried to clear them away. Tubbo didn't need to hear how worried he'd been, not right after waking up. "How are you feeling?"

Tubbo slowly lifted his head from the pillows, and his fingers locked around Clay's. "Better," he mumbled. "I don't feel so woozy anymore. How long have I been in here? My legs feel all numb."

"About a week," Clay murmured. Tubbo's eyes widened to comical size, and Clay gently squeezed his padawan's hand. "It's okay. The Temple is fine, remember? We're starting reconstruction, but it's taking a while since they need to background-check everyone."

Tubbo frowned. "Why are they background checking everyone? Aren't they just hiring workers?"

Clay smiled weakly. *The last time we did that, we got bombs buried in the Temple.* "Yeah, but they want to be careful."

"Oh."

Anxiety rippled in Tubbo's mind, and Clay pressed peace through their bond. Slowly, Tubbo sank back onto his pillows with a relieved sigh, never letting go of Clay's hand. Clay silently cherished that.

It was the only thing that kept him grounded in reality.

"Hey, Tubbo!" Nick had appeared in the doorway, trailed by a smiling nurse. Tubbo's face broke out in a huge grin, and Nick immediately matched it. "You're looking better. It's good to see you up again."

"I'm glad to be awake," Tubbo said brightly. His gaze shifted to the nurse, and his smile dimmed. "I still can't get up, can I?"

The nurse chuckled, entering the room and stooping next to Tubbo. She pressed a small device to the padawan's arm, and Clay tensed. But Tubbo didn't give any sort of pained reaction. So, Clay reluctantly moved away from the bed and let the nurse check over his padawan. Though, as with the droid, he didn't move more than a couple steps away.

Nick slipped to Clay's side, and the Knight gently touched the back of Clay's right hand. Clay flinched at the touch, surprised. But it wasn't out of fear. He was just amazed that Nick

remembered the only spot that didn't make his skin crawl.

“Do you want me to tell Rhodys that I'm going with George?” the Knight asked quietly.

Clay put his other hand on top of Nick's, and a flicker of surprise flashed through the younger man's eyes. “No,” Clay murmured. “I appreciate it, Nick. But George needs me more than Tubbo does. Plus, Tommy's gonna be here any minute, and gods know that he's gonna drag Wilbur with him. Can you keep an extra set of eyes on Tubbo while I'm gone?”

Nick inclined his head. “Yeah, of course. The Council is gonna have to bench me if they want to keep me from coming down here every day.”

Clay chuckled. “I doubt they'd try.”

The nurse finally finished her checkup and nodded to Clay and Nick before leaving the room. Clay immediately reclaimed his place at Tubbo's side. His padawan's eyes were bright and alert, and the sight made Clay's heart soar.

“Did you hear what I said to Nick?” Clay asked.

Tubbo's eyes crinkled at the corners. “Yeah. You taught me well.”

Clay couldn't help but grin at that. “A little too well, I think,” he muttered, and Tubbo laughed. “Are you okay with me leaving? If you want me to stay, I will. No questions asked.”

Tubbo frowned, and his fingers wrapped around Clay's once more. That simple action almost broke Clay's resolve. Tubbo had never been a very physical person.

“I'm okay with you going,” Tubbo said eventually. “I don't want you to. But I think it'll be best if you go with George and keep him safe. How long do you think you'll be?”

Clay thought for a moment. “Four or five days,” he decided. “Any more, and we'll get suspicious.”

Tubbo nodded to himself. “If you're down there for more than five days, I'm coming to get you.”

“Me too,” Nick chipped in cheerfully.

Clay mock-glared at his padawan. “No coming after me, you understand?” he ordered. “And stop encouraging Nick. He's barely more than a padawan himself, and the two of you are only gonna get hurt down there.”

*“I'm only two fucking years-”*

Tubbo burst out laughing, abruptly cutting off Nick's protest. “Okay, okay, I won't leave the Temple,” the brown-haired boy promised, still giggling. “But I mean it, Master. Five days, and you'd better be back.”

Clay nodded solemnly. He carefully slid his mask off, then put his free hand over their intertwined ones, looking his padawan dead in the eyes. “I will be back in five days,” he murmured. “I promise.”

*You have my word.*

Tubbo's eyes widened slightly.

*I believe you.*

Tears pricked at Clay's eyes. But he forced them back and gently untangled his hands from Tubbo's, slotting his mask back over his face. Once he was on his feet, he turned to Nick. "Where's George?"

"Dunno," the Knight muttered. "Last I saw him, he was heading out into the city to get some stuff. I guess he has contacts up here or some shit."

Clay snorted. "And you let him?"

Nick put his hands up defensively. "Okay, listen," he grumbled. "I thought I'd be here a lot quicker. Mazenos showed up and bogged me down with the 'you're not officially part of this task force,' whatever, whatever. George has only been gone a couple of hours. Surely the mighty Dream can find him."

"Surely the mighty Dream can," Clay parroted dryly, rolling his eyes at Nick's snicker. "I'm gonna make sure that George hasn't gotten himself killed. If I don't see you before I leave..." Clay took a deep breath. "Stay safe, okay?"

Nick's gaze softened. "Yeah. Love you."

"Love you, too."

Clay kissed the top of Nick's head, and in return, the younger man ruffled his hair. It had been their parting ritual since they were kids.

Then Clay left the room. As the door closed behind him, he heard Nick and Tubbo already laughing about something or other. The sound made him smile as he strode out of the infirmary and into the fading sunlight.

Tubbo had Nick to look after him. Now, Clay had to go take care of George.

---

George scowled at the Fosh standing across the stall from him. "I'm not here for witty banter, Zulek," he snapped. "You're not that smart, and I'm not that patient. Are we going to do business or not?"

The Fosh chuckled, and the feathers on their head ruffled. "Relax, 404," Zulek rasped. Their voice was harsh with wear from years in the Underworld, even though they now lived on the surface. "We'll get to what you want. But you still haven't answered my question, and you know how criminal that is. What can you give me?"

George crossed his arms. "That depends. Are you asking for an arm and a leg or information?"

Zulek cooed quietly and bent, grabbing something from the depths of their stall. When they straightened, they held a slim handle. "This a retractable staff," the Fosh explained. "I know you have one just like it. I've spent a considerable amount of time assembling this creation, and now, I need the final piece." Zulek turned the staff vertically and tapped the very tip. "The secret crystal. I want it."

George chewed his lip. Over the years, he'd disassembled his staff many times, and he knew the exact crystal that Zulek wanted. It was priceless. But... he also wanted information. Maybe George could find another crystal somewhere.

"Shake on it?" George asked warily.

Zulek inclined their head. "For you, 404? Yes."

George slid his hand from the depths of his cloak and held it out to the Fosh. Zulek's eyes lit up with a smug light (which wasn't unusual, given the Fosh's penchant for good deals), and they reached out to meet George's outstretched hand. Then a Force presence roared to life in George's mind.

*Stop.*

George recoiled, startled. Zulek scowled.

"What is it, 404?" the Fosh asked archly. "Do you not honor your own word?"

*I do*, George tried to protest. But his words were stuck in his throat. Something was terribly wrong; George knew it. The presence was telling him so, and- why was he listening to a stranger in his mind, again? Because it wasn't a stranger... distinctly green, fiercely loyal, and powerful beyond belief.

Clay?

"You're one to talk about honor, Zulek."

George's heart froze, and for just a moment, fear shot through his veins. Clay sounded just like he had when George had first returned to the Temple. Oh, gods, what if something had happened and Clay was now furious with him? What if-

Beneath the heavy folds of his cloak, Clay's hand gently rested against the small of George's back. With the touch came a warm presence and a quiet thought.

*I'm here to help.*

The anxiety drained out through George's boots.

"Nightmare?" Zulek rasped, their eyes narrowing.

Clay dramatically slung his arm around George's shoulders, and George screwed his face into an exaggerated scowl. He glanced up at Clay with a monologue already prepared.

*Oh... fuck.*

Clay wasn't wearing his mask. Instead of the white concave with the strange smiley face, Clay wore a black mesh mask covering his face from the nose down. It exposed two beautiful emerald eyes that positively glittered in the nighttime light.

George swallowed a strangled noise. He hadn't seen Clay's eyes in so, *so* long.

"What are you doing here, Nightmare?" Zulek asked suspiciously, breaking George from his paralysis. "Do you know each other?"

The corners of Clay's eyes crinkled, and George mentally assigned the dangerous smile that should have gone with it. "Of course we do," Clay purred. "It's a small world. But I guess that's bad for business, huh, Zulek?"

Zulek cooed angrily but didn't dispute the accusation.

"In case you didn't notice, Nightmare, we were about to make a deal," George growled. He was

just about forcing the words out, but at least his voice didn't shake. He stared Clay dead in the eyes because that's what most Underworld dealers did when trying to intimidate another vendor. But it was a dangerous game to play. Clay's eyes were as hypnotic as a snake charmer's smile.

Clay shrugged absently. "Well, don't let me stop you," he said evenly.

*So why did you interrupt me?*

*Zulek has a hidden tranquilizer on their hand. As soon as you shake on your deal, you're gonna pass out. I'll follow your lead.*

A scowl spread across George's face. "You interrupted me for nothing?" he demanded, channeling his anger into a shove that sent Clay stumbling several feet away. "Gods. I'll deal with you after I finish this transaction."

Clay held his hands up defensively but shuffled a few steps away. George barely kept from getting enthralled by the wicked gleam in the taller man's piercing eyes.

"As always, a pleasure doing business, 404," Zulek said silkily. "I forgive the interruption."

The Fosh held out a hand once again, and George reached for it. There it was: a thin, blue line running from somewhere inside the Fosh's robes to Zulek's outstretched palm. It was an ingenious device, and it had slipped George's notice. Admittedly, that meant *he* was slipping.

Fueled by genuine anger and frustration, George grabbed Zulek's wrist, twisted it around, and slammed it into the stall. Fosh had incredible flexibility, so the motion did nothing to injury Zulek. However, they did flinch at the impact.

"What's this?" George asked lowly. He plucked at the wire, and Zulek let out a quiet sigh. "You thought I was slipping, didn't you? I'm offended. Now, *what is this?*"

George tightened his grip on Zulek's wrist, and the Fosh's head feathers flared in equal alarm and annoyance.

"Don't take it personally, 404," they drawled. "You disappeared for weeks. Everybody thought you were dead or taken by someone who wanted a damn good engineer. Everyone's on the market for you. You're basically our next commodity."

George scowled. "I'm not a commodity, Zulek. You of all people should know that."

The Fosh hissed quietly, and George silently admitted that that had been a low blow, given that Zulek had once been a prisoner on the lower levels. But George had to let the black market know that he still meant business. Once everything at the Temple was resolved, he had to go back to his old life.

His old life... how could it even be considered a life? George had scraped by on horrible customers and weekly robberies.

Sudden exhaustion swept through George's body, and he sighed heavily. "Alright, listen," he muttered. He released Zulek's wrist, and the Fosh carefully reclaimed their arm. "Forget the information. I'm going to walk away, and you're going to find your crystal somewhere else."

Zulek nodded slowly. It was more generosity than Underworld standards usually dictated. "Thank you, 404."

George nodded in return. He pulled his hood over his head, then turned and strode over to where Clay stood, a few feet away. The taller man examined his fingernails with a bored stare, and he didn't even look up as George approached him.

“So?” Clay asked. “Are you done with your 'transaction'?”

George gave the taller man a sickly sweet smile. “No thanks to you.”

Clay finally met his gaze, and thoughts appeared in George's mind. *You shouldn't have come here out here by yourself, you know that? But I'm here to help. Where to next?*

A fond smile tugged at George's mouth before he could stifle it. Clay had always been protective of him, but this? This was just sweet. Regardless, George was glad to have the company (and protection), so he inhaled to tell Clay where he was planning to head next.

He never got the words out.

“Wait, 404!”

George glanced over his shoulder. Zulek had emerged from behind their stall and was staring at something in the distance.

“What is it?” George asked, and a hint of worry pricked at his heart.

Zulek sniffed the air. Then, with a solemn look that George rarely saw on the Fosh's face, they waved for George and Clay to move behind their stall. “Bounty hunters are coming,” Zulek called. “I can smell them, and I see the metal they wear. Come this way.”

Clay put a hand on George's arm. “Are we really gonna trust them?” the taller man muttered. “Zulek isn't exactly a saint.”

George looked back to Zulek. The Fosh waited patiently for his response.

“What would I owe you?” George called.

Zulek cracked a faint smile. “I already owe you. This makes us even.”

The debt of a black market dealer was one of the most dependable things that existed on Coruscant. George tugged Clay towards the stall, and, after a moment of resistance from the taller man, the two of them hurried past Zulek. The Fosh waved them through a hidden back panel with whispered instructions: “Take a sharp right through the first door, then head down the hallway. You'll come out extremely close to the main road, so be cautious.”

Clay immediately pushed through the panel, but George paused. After a moment's consideration, he tossed Zulek a couple of credits. “Take care of yourself,” he muttered. “I don't want to lose my best dealer.”

Zulek caught the credits with a shake of their head. “You're too good of a man to be out here with sinners, 404,” the Fosh murmured. “Until next time. Feel free to bring Nightmare with you on your return. He's an excellent customer, once you get past all the bluster.”

George rolled his eyes and escaped the stall with Zulek's quiet chuckling still hanging in the air. He found himself crouched in a cramped building. Following the Fosh's instructions, George wove through the thin wooden panels and found Clay waiting for him at the hallway's mouth.

“What's the holdup?” George asked quietly.

The corners of Clay's eyes crinkled, and again, George mentally assigned a smile to the expression.

“I was just making sure that I didn't lose you,” the taller man said lightly. “It's kind of easy to, down here. Your, uh... your black and white cloak really blends into the walls.”

George heaved a weary sigh. “I knew you'd make fun of me,” he grumbled, tugging at the brim. “Listen, this was the only one I had on me. Most of my clothes are still down in my shop. I didn't exactly think I'd need one of my nighttime cloaks when I was planning to spend a month at the Temple.”

Clay shrugged absently and waved George towards the faint light at the end of the hallway. “You could have asked me for one.”

“Ha! Me, wearing a green cloak? That's even more obvious than black and white. Thank the gods you changed before coming out here, or everyone would have been wondering who the stranger in the green cloak was.”

Though he made light of the situation, Clay's new outfit looked wrong. George was so used to the taller man wearing nothing but green robes all the time.

Clay wore a crimson cape that slipped over his left shoulder, and a holographic node on his temple turned his hair a shocking red. Beneath the cape was a loose, flowing shirt and high-waisted pants that tucked into ankle-high boots. It wasn't an unattractive outfit, George had to admit. But it did look wrong.

And, perhaps most wrong was the new mask. The novelty of seeing Clay's eyes again had worn off, and now, George just felt dirty. For once, he was glad for the darkness of the black market at night. George didn't want to see Clay's scars. Not like this.

At the end of the hallway, George carefully peered beyond the archway. Zulek had been telling the truth; the next street over was one of the main downtown roads. George stepped out onto the pavement and strode towards it, Clay hot on his heels.

“Where are we going?” Clay hissed. “The black market is behind us.”

“I know,” George hissed back. “We're going back to the Temple. I don't want to deal with bounty hunters for the rest of tonight. I can find out what I need to know tomorrow.”

Clay shrugged (he seemed to do that a lot when he was playing Nightmare) and pulled an earpiece from his pocket. “Suit yourself. I'll let Nick know that we're on our way back. He's been worrying about us since I left.”

George let out a guilty chuckle. Nick hadn't wanted him to leave by himself, but George had been adamant that he needed supplies. Now, George realized that he'd have to give the Jedi Knight an apology (and maybe a hug) to make up for his blunder.

The two of them wove through downtown Coruscant and made their way back towards the Temple. As they went, George and Clay both shed parts of their outfits. They didn't want to be spotted by more bounty hunters, nor did they want a higher-class citizen to recognize them. By the time the Jedi Temple was in view, George and Clay were almost back to normal.

“Well, that was an adventure,” Clay chuckled as they wandered down an empty street. “I expected to hang out with you longer, but that was cool, I guess.”

George heaved a long-suffering sigh, but he shot the taller man a fond smile. "Thank you for coming to rescue me," he drawled. "That was a shorter trip than I thought it'd be, too."

Clay hummed in agreement, turning his face away. Before George could ask, "What the hell are you doing?" Clay glanced over at him once more. He wore his white mask and held the black mesh mask of Nightmare in his hand. Strangely, George was glad to see the white abomination again. It looked... right.

"Can we stop to get chocolate or something?" Clay asked suddenly. "I want snacks for our stay in the Underworld."

George opened his mouth to say, "No, we're not getting chocolate." But something stopped him. The "something" was a nagging feeling in the back of his mind that warned him of coming danger. During his time in the Underworld, George had considered it a sixth sense. Now, he recognized it as the Force, warning him that someone powerful and dangerous was nearby.

"Wait," George murmured. He froze in the middle of the street, putting out a hand to stop Clay from walking on. "There's something..."

The presence was heading towards them, running away from the Temple at incredible speed. Power roared in flux around them, and even though they were several streets away, George could feel them as if they were standing next to him.

A traitor.

"Come on!" George barked. He dove through a side alley and chased after the presence. He didn't bother explaining the situation, as Clay would undoubtedly catch on.

The streets blurred together. George and Clay had been in an abandoned part of the sector, so without the worry of running into people, George let the Force guide his body. It pulled him down side alleys, through rundown stores, and even over buildings. The presence was incredibly fast. But George and Clay were catching up.

George vaulted to the top of a building and found three giant statues rising out of the courtyard below. A shadowy figure stood in the hulking silhouette of the closest statue.

"There they are," Clay murmured as he clambered up next to George. "Get to the street. I'll distract them from up here; you tackle them or something."

"Tackle them?" George repeated incredulously, once his brain caught up with Clay's harebrained idea. "That's the worst plan you've ever come up with!"

Clay grinned. "You got anything better?"

As fate would have it, he didn't. George reluctantly slipped from the rooftop and dropped soundlessly to the shadowed alley. In the courtyard, the shadowy figure still stood motionless. Maybe they were catching their breath. Or, more likely, they knew that George and Clay were there, and they were planning an attack.

George hoped to all the gods that Clay's distraction was a good one.

Then one of the statues began to tip over.

*Holy fucking Kantos*, George thought, torn between horror and awe. *That's actually not bad.*



The shadowy figure whirled around, throwing their hands up to catch the statue with the Force. As soon as their back was turned, George raced out of the shadows. But the figure was strong. Already, the statue had been steadied, and George couldn't make it in time for a sneak attack.

*Wait. I can use the Force, too.*

It had been a long time since George has used the Force so recklessly. But he gritted his teeth against the inevitable strain and willed the Force to shoot him ahead. It responded instantly. George was catapulted forward at breath-taking speeds (literally). He powered towards the figure, already reaching out his arms to tackle their mysterious enemy.

The figure disappeared.

George's shoulder crashed into the statue. He shouted in pain, but luckily, nothing popped. George frantically shook the stars from his eyes and looked around, searching for any trace of the mysterious figure. Gods, they were fast.

A breeze touched the back of George's neck.

Sheer instinct drove George to his knees, and a moment later, a staff pinwheeled over his head and clattered to the ground.

*If I turn around, they won't be there anymore. So, where do I look next?*

Another breeze whistled to George's right.

George threw himself to the ground again, narrowly avoiding a Force blast, then scrambled to his feet and desperately threw his hands out. By some will of the gods, the Force responded. A Force blast of George's own exploded from his hands and crashed into the shadowy figure at the edge of the courtyard. They grunted, the hem of their hood flipping back for just a moment.

A glint of silver caught the moonlight.

George froze. Eret?

Clay suddenly went racing past George with a fearsome growl, and the taller man quickly engaged the shadowy figure. The two traded terrible blows, the figure's staff crashing against Clay's dual swords (where had the taller man been hiding those?).

If... if the figure was Eret... that meant... but... the Jedi Master really was willing to fight them?

Then George remembered that he was still wearing part of his "404" outfit. His hood was over his head, and he hadn't spoken. Similarly, Clay's trademark white mask was hidden in the shadows of the crimson cloak he wore.

Eret didn't know it was them.

"Wait!" George shouted.

Clay didn't even pause, which made George frown, but the shadowy figure's rhythm broke. For just a split second, they glanced over to George, and George's gaze was met by silver eyes.

*George?*

*Yes! It's me!*

The shadowy figure stumbled to a stop, and they threw their hands out. "Wait, Dream, wait!" they shouted. They grabbed the hem of their hood and tossed it back. Eret's face was pale in the moonlight. "Stop," he continued, once Clay had ceased his assault. "It's me. I'm putting my staff down, okay? I'm putting it down."

Eret slowly set his staff on the ground, knocking it away with his foot. It rolled to a stop at George's feet, and for a moment, he just stared at it.

Clay had shared what he and Wilbur and the padawans had found, but George had been so sure that there was a reasonable explanation for Eret's past. But what reasonable explanation could Eret give for running away from the Temple in the middle of the night, not even wearing Jedi robes?

Gods, George couldn't breathe. There really was a traitor.

"George!"

Clay's shout broke George out of his spiraling thoughts. George looked up and found Clay standing over Eret with an uncharacteristically fierce scowl. Eret was on his knees, arms locked behind his back and face passive. For some reason, the duality of the two Jedi Masters' expressions made a wan smile cross George's face.

Here he'd thought that proceedings on the surface were different from those in the Underworld. People never changed.

George plucked Eret's staff from the ground and strode across the courtyard, stopping at Clay's side. "What are you doing out here, Eret?" he asked quietly. "Are you betraying the Order?" Eret didn't look up, and anger flared in George's chest. He pressed Eret's staff underneath the Jedi Master's chin. "Answer me."

Eret met George's gaze, and a shiver shot down George's spine. Had he ever stared Eret directly in the eyes before?...

"I'm not the traitor," Eret said evenly. "And I could ask you the same questions, couldn't I? You're both looking very suspicious, running around in dark cloaks and chasing after mysterious strangers."

Clay's lips curled in a snarl, but George held the taller man back with an arm and a warning glance. Eret made a good point, now that George thought about it. From the view of an outsider, all three of them looked equally suspicious.

"I was in the black market," George said. Clay threw him an incredulous look, but George once again stopped him from saying anything. "I was getting information since I'm being sent down to the Underworld tomorrow. What are you doing?"

A smile touched Eret's face. "Someone else is out here with us," he said in lieu of a proper response. "I trailed them out of the Temple. Dream, reach out through the Force. You'll feel them."

George shifted his gaze from Eret to Clay. The taller man clearly wasn't happy about being told to do something by someone he considered a traitor, but he let out a quiet breath. For a long moment, Clay was silent, and nerves built in George's gut. Then the taller man's mouth screwed into a frown.

"He's right," Clay muttered. "There's someone else out here."

A mixture of frustration and confusion bloomed in George's chest. "Why can't I sense them?"

“Their presence is really, really faint. It'd take years for you to be able to sense them.”

*All the years you weren't here* hung unspoken in the air. In another life, George would have argued the point. But a suspect was getting away, so George swallowed his pride and nodded to Clay. “Go. I'll watch Eret.”

Clay took off with barely a nod, disappearing into the shadows like he'd lived in them his whole life.

Sometimes, George wondered if Clay would have done better in the Underworld than he had.

“I'm sorry for attacking you.”

George glanced back to Eret. The Jedi Master sat passively, not even straining against the cuffs that Clay had locked his wrists with.

“I think the power from you two threw off my tracking,” Eret continued with an apologetic smile. “I thought I'd finally caught up to them. I'm sorry.”

“Wonderful story,” George said archly. “Let me guess, you want me to take off your cuffs now?” He liked Eret a lot, and he refused to accept that the Jedi Master was the traitor so quickly, but the other man was still a suspect. He couldn't be too friendly.

But Eret just shrugged lightly. “No. I just wanted to apologize.”

George snorted. Internally, his mind was racing. Eret seemed very at ease for someone being accused of treason. Aside from that, if Eret was the traitor, why hadn't he just killed George and Clay? Clay would have put up a fight, sure, but Eret was most definitely powerful enough to overwhelm them both. Why had he surrendered?

With a jolt, George realized that he'd been silent for a long time. One of the first rules of holding a prisoner was never letting them know that their guilt was in question. So George cleared his throat and asked, “Do you know why we suspect you?”

Eret tilted his head, silent for a moment. “I might,” he said eventually. “But I imagine there's reason for you to suspect anyone in the Temple. We all have our demons.”

It was a very run-around answer. George scowled. “We know about your past, Eret,” he said coldly. “We found your files. We know what Kan Bo Salem did, and we know why you learned Juyo.”

Admittedly, most of what George had just said was bullshit. Clay, Wilbur, Tommy, and Tubbo *had* found files on a traumatic incident in Eret's past, but *why* he had learned Juyo was a bit fuzzy. Salem's ejection from the Order was equally fuzzy. But George and Nick had dug up some history on Juyo a few days previous. Apparently, the form had initially been considered a Sith art. That was enough to make Eret a suspect in George's eyes.

Which was ironic, really. George had been called a Sith for the better part of his teenage years.

“I was wondering how long it'd take before you searched the system,” Eret murmured. “I'm proud of you. Well, most likely, I'm proud of Tubbo. He's a great kid.”

George chuckled humorlessly and checked his mental shields. He'd kept them tightly fortified since first venturing out into the night, and he quickly made sure that Eret's hooks hadn't snuck past his defenses. But there was no evidence of manipulation. There was a chance that Eret was a

shielder of superb skill, and George had already fallen victim to Jedi mind tricks. But it seemed like Eret was legitimately doing nothing.

Why would he do nothing if he was guilty?

“Forgive me if I sound rude, Eret,” George muttered. “But you're going to have to give me something if you want me to trust you. What happened? Why did you learn Juyo from a disgraced Master? I guess you wouldn't answer this question if it's true, but are you a Sith?”

The words burned George's tongue. It felt sacrilegious to say what had been thrown at him so many times.

Eret's smile dimmed. “Ah. That's why you're so worried about me.”

George pressed Eret's staff harder against its owner's neck, just to keep the Jedi Master from moving. “Of course we're worried. You're a potential threat.”

Ever so slowly, Eret's smile returned to his face. But it was bittersweet.

“I'm blind, George.”

George blinked. *What?*

Eret shifted into a more upright position, and George didn't try to stop him. “I know you don't believe me,” Eret continued. “And I don't think you'd believe the story I'd tell you, either. So let me prove myself. I'm going to cut off my connection to the Force, and then, I'll be completely blind. Alright?”

George inclined his head a fraction.

Eret exhaled deeply. Immediately, the Jedi Master's presence disappeared. George searched around to make sure that Eret hadn't hidden somewhere but came up blank. Eret had cut himself off from the Force. Physically, Eret's sight seemed to be gone as well. The Jedi Master sat passively, silver eyes fixed on something George couldn't see.

George had seen people fake being blind before. With enough self-control, some almost got away with it. But there was one Underworld test that only blind people could pass.

George settled himself into a crouch. Slowly, silently, he pulled a dagger from his boot. When Eret didn't react, George leaned forward. He took a deep breath, then held the dagger directly before Eret's left eye. The blade was so close that, with one wrong move, Eret would be down an eye.

The Jedi Master didn't react in the slightest.

Either Eret was the best pretender George had ever met, or the man was blind without the Force.

“Impossible,” George muttered. He took the dagger away from Eret's eye and shoved it back into his boot. “How the hell do you see?”

The Jedi Master's Force presence exploded back to life in George's mind, and a moment later, Eret blinked dazedly. “I use the Force.”

George cocked an eyebrow. “Uh-huh.”

Eret chuckled, and again, George checked his mental shields. Still nothing. No Jedi mind tricks, no seeds of foreign ideas. What the hell was going on? Could Eret's story be real?

"I know how incredible it sounds," Eret murmured, still quietly laughing at himself. "I'll tell you what happened, and you can decide for yourself if it's true. The Siege of Genden was a fool's errand, a desperate attempt to reclaim a planet with too few troops. I was pitted against one of the most fearsome warriors on the planet, and I lost. My silver eyes aren't genetic, George. The color is to cover up the burns."

George considered that for a moment. He was well aware that Coruscant was an advanced planet both technologically and medically, but replacing irises? That seemed a bit far-fetched.

Eret suddenly chuckled again. "Stop making assumptions," the Jedi Master chided. "I'm still telling my story."

"Go on," George drawled, though his mind was reeling.

Eret inclined his head, and the grin that he always wore came back to life. "Thank you. Well, upon my return, I fell into a slump. Since I was basically blind, there was a high chance that I would have to leave the Order. After all, who'd ever heard of a blind Jedi? Then Master Kan Bo Salem approached me with an idea: I could learn Vaapad."

"What happened to that idea?" George muttered derisively.

Eret shrugged. "I didn't connect to the form. Then he introduced me to Juyo, and it really, *really* clicked. Do you know how Juyo works?"

George thought back to what he and Nick had uncovered during their trip to the Archives. In the past, Juyo had been considered a Sith art because of how emotional the form was. Similar to Vaapad, it took its practitioner dangerously close to the Dark Side. In addition to emotion, both forms required an incredible amount of Force power.

"Yes," George said eventually. "I do. But I don't get it. You're telling me that by learning Juyo, you somehow regained your sight? How the fuck did that work?"

Eret gave him a faint smile. "I didn't. But I learned how much the Force could do. You and I don't 'see' things the same way. I don't see colors or anything like that. But I can follow along with people's presences, and I've developed a way to see inanimate objects. It's kind of like echolocation.

Again, George wasn't sure how he felt about Eret's story. It was just implausible enough to be possible.

"I feel you on the color thing," George muttered, then realized how friendly the aside was and quickly hurried on. "And what about Juyo as a lightsaber form? Have you ever fallen to the Dark Side while you're fighting?"

"I've come close," Eret admitted, and the honest answer gave George pause. "And it was difficult not to go seek revenge. But I've overcome that. Besides, had you seen the entirety of my files, you'd know that I don't practice the full form of Juyo except in the worst circumstances. Most of the time, I use a mix of Juyo and Ataru that I developed years ago."

George nodded slowly. That was what he'd been waiting for. When he'd fought Eret during his battles, George had been so sure that the Jedi Master was using more than just Juyo. Juyo was known for being erratic and chaotic, yet there had been an undeniable grace to Eret's movements.

Well, fuck. Was George actually starting to believe Eret's story?

Yes.

“One more thing,” George said slowly. When Eret inclined his head, he continued. “You said, 'the entirety of my files.' How'd you know that they were corrupted?”

Eret smiled wearily. “Kan Bo Salem told me. He corrupted them right before he was exiled.”

“Oh.”

The two of them lapsed into silence as George worked through everything he'd been told. If he was to believe Eret (which he was getting close to doing), then the Jedi Master was innocent. More than that... George had to reassess what he considered good and evil when it came to the Force. If a Jedi could use a traditionally Sith art, then what other lines could be blurred?

Speaking of which...

“We learned that Vaapad was also once considered dangerous,” George said slowly. “Or, at least, it brought its user close to the Dark Side. Why does Techno use it?”

Eret's smile was thin. “That's not my story to tell.”

The edge of steel in the Jedi Master's voice broke George from his contemplative thoughts. Whether or not Eret was telling the truth was a matter for the task force as a whole. George was inclined to believe the Jedi Master, but, for all he knew, someone else would have knowledge that would expose cracks in Eret's story. The best course of action was to let everyone come to their own conclusions.

George pressed Eret's staff against the Jedi Master's throat once again. “I don't want any trouble for the rest of the night,” he said flatly. “I have my staff, and I will use it.”

“Alright.”

Eret's calm was deeply unnerving.

Fifteen minutes later, Clay returned from his jaunt into the darkened city. He was breathing heavily, and his pants were ripped at the knees, but he didn't look injured. He was also empty-handed.

“I couldn't catch them,” Clay muttered as he approached George. “Eret was right, though. There was someone else out there, and they did a damn good job of hiding. What happened while I was gone?”

George glanced down at Eret, who just gazed back at him evenly. “Apparently, he's blind,” George said quietly.

Clay's mouth twisted in a frown. “What?”

“He'll tell you all about it on the way back. Come on. I want to get some sleep tonight.”

---

When Phil opened his eyes, he found a pounding headache waiting for him. He groaned quietly, wincing against the bright light that streamed in from somewhere nearby. *Gods, it's been years, and they still haven't put up any blinds,* he thought peevishly. Despite the headache, Phil's mind felt clearer than it usually did after an injury. He wasn't sure how he'd gotten injured, but he recognized

the smell of bacta and the feel of the sheets.

Phil tried to sit up and discovered his first problem. His mind was clear, but his body was in agony. Everything throbbed as soon as he tried to move. Phil winced and leaned back. Alright, it had been one of *those* injuries.

After a few minutes, the pounding in his head ebbed. Phil opened his eyes once more and decided that it might help to look around before sitting up. He cast his gaze about, and suddenly, he realized that there was a sleeping figure slumped in the chair next to his bed.

“Techno,” Phil tried to rasp. The only thing that came out was a rattling cough. When his next couple of attempts came up dry, the reality became clear: Phil’s voice was too broken for use.

*Techno*, Phil murmured through their bond. For some reason, strands of their usually indomitable bond drifted in the ether. Phil carefully patched the holes that he found before gently pressing against Techno’s mind. *Techno, I’m here. Wake up.*

The pig Jedi instantly snapped awake. “Phil?” he gasped.

Phil smiled as he met Techno’s gaze. Were the pig Jedi’s eyes puffy? “Hey, Techno,” he croaked, relieved to find his voice working again. “How long have I-”

The next couple of things happened simultaneously. In Phil’s drowsy state, he couldn’t follow everything, and only later did he piece events together. First, Techno’s eyes filled with something that looked similar to tears. Then a gut-wrenching mixture of agony and relief flooded his mind, and Phil’s chest constricted.

Finally, Techno threw himself off of his chair and wrapped Phil in a hug.

Phil grunted, startled by the sudden weight of a full-grown man on top of him. But his initial shock quickly melted into surprise. Phil had long been aware that he was the only exception to Techno’s “no-contact” policy. But even he never received hugs. And yet... Techno clung to the back of his gown with bare hands, and his face was buried in Phil’s shoulder.

Techno’s end of their bond suddenly mended, and Phil sighed in relief as the warm glow of the other Jedi settled into the back of his mind. He had no idea why their bond had weakened so much while he’d been asleep, but it didn’t matter. They were connected again.

Speaking of the pig Jedi, Techno still hadn’t moved. Phil had kept his arms limp so that Techno could move away as soon as he felt uncomfortable, but his partner was doing no such thing. A smile crept over Phil’s face. Slowly, he urged his arms to wrap around Techno’s shoulders and hold the pig Jedi tightly.

That was when Phil encountered his second problem.

“Techno,” Phil said slowly. “Why am I missing my left arm?”

Techno tensed, and a dizzying mixture of anger, hurt, and fear poured through their bond.

Phil rubbed the pig Jedi’s back with his remaining arm. “It’s okay,” he murmured. “I’ll ask someone else.” Guilt immediately washed through Techno’s mind, and Phil squeezed his partner’s shoulder. “Hey, Techno, stop. It’s okay.”

The two of them fell silent. Clearly, Phil had missed a lot. But if Techno wasn’t willing to talk, then Phil wouldn’t push it. So he just pressed a soft kiss into Techno’s hair and closed his eyes, listening

to the soothing thrum of their bond.

Techno's soul was ragged. Phil could feel it in the grief that stained the pig Jedi's mind. As gently as he could, Phil smoothed out the rough edges. He accepted Techno's pain and hurt, as he'd done so many times, and wrapped it in peace and love. In his arms (well, *arm*), Techno relaxed.

They stayed there for a long time. Phil was still exhausted from his unexplained injury, and, besides that, he'd probably never get another hug from Techno. He had to appreciate it while it lasted.

But after what had to be a solid half an hour, Phil couldn't contain his worry.

"Techno, are you okay?" he asked softly. "I know I've been out for a while. Are you hurt?"

Techno didn't respond. Again, Phil didn't push. Techno would talk when he was ready.

But after a few minutes, the pig Jedi spoke.

"I'm sorry."

Techno's voice was as scratchy as sandpaper. How long had it been since his partner had last spoken?

"For what?" Phil asked.

Another pause.

"I couldn't... you..."

Techno finally relinquished Phil from the hug. Phil was glad to have full usage of his lungs, but he ached from having Techno so far away from him.

...no, wait, that wasn't how Phil felt. He was just concerned. That thought belonged to...

Techno?

"You lost your arm in a fight," Techno muttered. He cleared his throat, but it seemed to do nothing for the rough edge in his voice. "The Temple got invaded. One of them pulled out a shikkar, and..."

Techno's voice wavered, and he fell silent. But Phil didn't need any more explanation. His memories were quickly returning. He remembered the seemingly infinite amount of black-clad warriors and the agonizing pain in his shoulder.

Phil smiled wanly. "I suppose that explains my arm," he said with a dry chuckle. "How long have I been out?" Techno hesitated. "Techno? How long?"

The pig Jedi's blood-red eyes shifted to the floor. "A week and two days."

That was a very long time to be unconscious. Phil sucked in a guilty breath and asked, "Is that why you're hurting so bad?"

Techno closed his eyes, his shoulders shuddering with heaving breaths. Worry sank into Phil's heart. Techno was many things, and over the years, Phil had become familiar with most of them. But never had he seen Techno in such a bad state, unable to talk or keep himself together.

Phil rested a careful finger against Techno's exposed palm. "It's okay," he murmured. "I'm sorry for



asking so many questions.”

Techno wrapped their hands together. Phil blinked, again surprised, but he didn't question it. After a long, long moment, Techno's eyes opened. He no longer looked like he was on the verge of tears, but there was a bone-deep agony that Phil hadn't seen from his partner in years.

“I almost lost you again,” Techno said quietly. “This doctor, she, uh... she poisoned you. You were already in terrible shape because of your arm, and she... made it so much worse.”

Sudden panic flared in Phil's chest. “Am I dead?” he demanded. “Is this some sort of fucked up Force vision thing that's trying to get me to make my peace so I can move on?”

Techno laughed, and the sound settled the nerves pinging around Phil's mind.

“No, you're not dead,” the pig Jedi reassured, still smiling a little. “You got close to it, but you're still around. Once you're stable, the doctors are gonna decide what kind of prosthetic you get. But, uh... don't get too excited about that. They'll probably want to do tests and stuff before they let you get back to your life.”

Phil nodded slightly. “I can live with that,” he decided. “How long has it been since you last slept?”

If the rapid subject change surprised Techno at all, he didn't show it. “Like, a few minutes ago. I have actually been sleeping, you know. It's not like I can just sit here all night.”

“I wouldn't have been surprised if you tried,” Phil chuckled.

Techno smiled, but it didn't quite reach his eyes. There was something else.

*What is it?*

*It's... complicated.*

*Really? I've never heard you say that something's “complicated” before.*

Techno returned his gaze to the floor. “You're right,” he muttered aloud. “It's not complicated. But... it's not easy. I don't know.”

“Try me,” Phil said lightly. “I've been dealing with you for a while now. I might understand.”

Techno shot Phil an exasperated but genuine smile. “Oh, really? You've known me for a few years?”

“Oh, yeah, of course. Just a few years.”

They both chuckled. Then Techno sighed a little, and he squeezed Phil's hand.

“I'm sorry that I never said anything,” the pig Jedi began haltingly. “I never... told you how grateful I am for everything you did for me. So... thank you. Thank you for fighting for me, and working with me, and... yeah.”

Phil smiled at his partner. “You're welcome,” he said, barely managing to keep from laughing a little. “Is that it? You know that I'd do it a million times over, Techno, it's not even a-”

“I know, I know,” Techno interrupted. The pig Jedi pressed the fingers of his free hand into his eyes, and Phil tipped his head, confused. “It's... it's more than that. Phil, I... you almost just died. Again. And I really don't want to think about what would have happened if this one had gotten you,

and-”

Techno let out a frustrated huff. Phil just rubbed his partner's knuckles and waited.

Finally, Techno gently flipped Phil's hand over. Phil let him, and he watched, curious, as the pig Jedi began running a light finger over the scar on his palm.

“You saved my life,” Techno murmured.

Sudden emotion clogged Phil's throat. “Techno...”

His partner held up a hand, and Phil slowly closed his mouth. “You never gave up on me,” Techno continued softly. “I still don't know what you saw in me, but... thank you, Phil. You're the only reason I'm still alive and still a Jedi.”

Phil pressed his lips together. Pure love radiated from Techno's side of their bond, and Phil had no idea what to do with that. He never... Techno had never...

“You'd still be a Jedi if I wasn't here,” Phil managed eventually.

Techno chuckled. “You really believe that?”

No.

“Look, don't worry. This isn't my teary goodbye before I leave the planet or quit the Order or anything. I just... I didn't want either of us to die before I said 'thank you.'”

Phil watched Techno trace the scar on his palm for a few seconds before he said anything. “I was almost gone, wasn't I?” he asked quietly.

Techno's smile was bittersweet. “Yeah.”

Silence filled the room. It wasn't awkward, exactly, but Techno had just set an entirely new precedent. Phil had always been the touchy-feely one, never the other way around. And besides that... what was Phil supposed to say in response to such heartfelt gratitude?

Especially since Techno had saved his life, too?

Techno still traced the scar on Phil's palm. The motion seemed to give the pig Jedi peace, so Phil didn't stop him.

“I hope you know I'd do it again,” Phil said eventually.

Techno glanced up. “What?”

“I wouldn't change a single thing I did, even though it got us into a couple of scraps.”

“More than a couple,” Techno muttered.

Phil conceded the point with a faint chuckle. “You know that's not what I meant. Seriously, Techno. You're as good for me as I am for you.”

Techno shook his head. “I doubt that.”

“You'd be surprised.”

Techno met Phil's gaze, and through their bond, Phil tried to convey all the security and joy that Techno had given him over the years. For as much as Techno seemed to think, their partnership had never been one-sided – even at the start.

Finally, the pig Jedi smiled. “You couldn't have told me that sooner?” he complained. “I was nervous for nothing. I'm upset. I'm offended.”

Their bond lit up like a miniature star, and Phil laughed. “If you'd actually talk to me, we wouldn't have had this problem,” he protested.

Techno rolled his eyes. “I talk to you.”

The pure joy radiating off his partner gave Phil pause, and he couldn't help a warm smile. “Yeah, that's true, you do.”

They lapsed into silence again, and this time, it carried the warm, comfortable air that it usually did. Techno's fingers now rested lightly on Phil's palm, and their bond glowed stronger than ever. Phil's headache had finally gone away.

Eventually, Phil remembered why he was in the infirmary in the first place. “So what are the doctors gonna do about this?” he asked, scowling at where his left arm should be. “You said they're going to give me a prosthetic?”

Techno nodded. “Yeah. They're gonna do some surgeries to clean up the bones, then they'll fit you with something.”

“Sounds like a long process,” Phil muttered. “Tell Rhodys that you're gonna be busy for the next couple of days helping me learn how to use my fucking hand again.”

“Oh, I already did. They don't expect to see me for another week.”

Phil paused in his examination of his shoulder. It took several seconds for Techno's words to sink in, and once they did, he shook his head tiredly. “In Tibulta's Name, Techno,” he sighed. “You can't just abandon the investigation because I got hurt.”

Techno shrugged, and the motion was almost petulant. “I can, actually,” the pig Jedi said evenly. “And I'm going to. Dream isn't the sharpest knife out there, but he'll do fine. He doesn't need me to babysit him.”

Phil looked at Techno for a long moment. His partner's face was calm, but there was an edge of steel in his eyes. For just a moment, Phil felt the echoes of Techno's agony. He felt the searing pain of watching himself almost slip over the line of death.

“I can't change your mind, can I?”

Techno cracked a small smile. “Nah.”

Phil let the subject go. He rested his head against his pillows and let out a deep breath. Selfishly, Phil was glad that Techno was sticking around. He desperately wanted support through what would surely be a very arduous process.

Nurses showed up half an hour later. They took Phil's vitals, made sure he was stable, and told him what they planned to do for his shoulder. All the while, Techno hovered nearby. Phil wanted to ask the nurses how the fuck he'd survived, but given how unsteady Techno had been, Phil felt that the question should be saved for later.

A couple of hours later, Phil woke up from a nap he hadn't realized he'd been taking. The light streaming through the windows was muted, which meant that the sun was probably setting. Techno was once again asleep in his chair.

Phil smiled softly. Already, the pull of sleep was dragging him back into darkness. But before he let his eyes close, he gently touched Techno's mind.

*Thank you. I love you.*

The corners of Techno's mouth lifted in a smile.

Then Phil was asleep again, his bond with Techno vibrant and alive.

## Chapter End Notes

Yes, yes, that's my Christmas gift to you all. Philza is alive, you convinced me-

I'm just kidding, the story still moves as I planned lol. I did feel very cruel, though, seeing all of the comments begging for his safe return.

Side note that will never come up in the story: While I was writing, I mentally increased Techno's and Eret's ages by about five years. Ultimately, it doesn't impact the story, but I wanted to make Techno and Philza less of Dadza/Technoson and more of partners and equals. Eret's age boost is so he's older than the Dream Team, and thus, more experienced.

Anyways! If you don't care about the announcement, thank you so, so much for reading! Please leave a comment if you are so inclined, and I will see you all next Friday!

Now, the announcement: During the break, my industrious mind decided that it didn't know the meaning of the word "rest." So, I went back and revamped the previous chapters! I didn't make any huge plot changes, but changes there are. If you're looking for something to do, consider going back and rereading lol. Maybe even leave a comment while you're there

Again, thank you all so much for your support! Have a great week!

(P.S. I beg of you, don't compare Eret's backstory to Kanan Jarrus'. When I was first creating this story, I thought to myself, "Ah, yes, there has never been a mainstream blind Jedi, how original." Then, while writing this update, I remembered, "Oh wait, there was," and by then, it was too late. I swear I didn't intend to steal that storyline hhh)

## Depths of the Earth, Part 2

### Chapter Notes

Hello, everyone! Yes, I'm back with a surprise update! I was preparing this chapter and I thought, "Hey, you know what? I should do something special for the New Year." So, I've decided that this will be a double-post week! (You're welcome lol) I'm also just incredibly excited to share this arc, so it's a win for all of us.

That being said, I had so much fun on this chapter. It was a blast to write, so I really, really hope that y'all find it just as fun to read.

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The sun was steadily rising. It poked over the tips of the Temple with a cheerful glow, and to the rest of the Order, it heralded a new day. Eret was barely aware of the beautiful sunrise. He'd already been up for hours.

It wasn't that he was nervous. Anxiety didn't match the pounding in his head. No, it was more like... frustration. Eret had spent the better part of the night pacing around his quarters. He knew that lack of sleep would cost him dearly, but his whirling mind hadn't given him a chance to rest. Thoughts had raced around like unsupervised younglings, bringing a million and one emotions with them.

Even now, Eret's heartbeat was elevated.

In some deep, selfish part of himself, Eret wished that Dream and George didn't have to leave for another day. Since the mission had been proposed by Rhodys, the time of their departure was entirely out of their hands. Still, Eret wanted the support. Gods knew that Dream and George had been some of the few that trusted him.

After the longest half an hour of his life and a considerable amount of bickering, Dream and George had finally taken Eret back to the Temple. Eret had sat passively while they assembled the task force, then, per their request, relayed his story to said Jedi. Those who knew of Eret's history scowled at being woken up, and those that hadn't lost their minds.

Eret had known it would happen, eventually. Still, it stung to be judged like a misbehaving padawan. Maybe that's why Eret's determination to protect George had only gotten stronger. He knew the judgmental stares and hushed whispers all too well.

The holocom in the middle of the table buzzed.

Eret snapped out of his thoughts and slammed his hand down on the "enter" button. The holocom beeped pitifully before accepting the call, and Eret winced, giving the poor machine a silent apology.

Philza's face fizzled into existence from the sea of blue pixels. The other Jedi Master's cheerful smile brought a matching smile to Eret's face. "It's damn good to see you awake, Philza," Eret said

in place of a greeting. "You're looking good for a dead man."

Philza chuckled. *"Thank you. I think I'm looking good for a dead man as well."* The other Jedi Master inhaled, a question clearly on the tip of his tongue, then cut himself off with a small shake of his head. *"I heard about the commotion last night. What happened?"*

*"Wait, your eyes aren't genetic?"*

*"And thus, the truth comes out, Eret. Didn't you expect this to happen?"*

*"You lied to us!"*

"Oh, you know, the general distrust of the public," Eret said lightly. Philza snorted, and the derisive sound brought Eret an odd sense of peace. "I was chasing a suspect out of the Temple. Short version, I ran into Dream and George, and my suspect got lost in the mix. Then I had to tell the whole task force the story about my eyes to prove my innocence. I don't think it really worked."

*"Let me guess, the long version includes a shit ton of shouting,"* Philza muttered, and Eret coughed to hide a laugh. *"Sounds like a peaceful night. I'm sorry that I can't be there to help you."*

Eret leaned back in his chair and glanced at his balcony. The sun touched the tallest spirals of the Temple with a gentle hand. "It's alright," he murmured. "You need to rest. Has Techno been keeping an eye on you?"

Philza's face creased in a fond smile. *"Of course. He hasn't left my side since I woke up. He claimed that Rhodys approved some time-off for him, but I'm pretty sure he's just avoiding everyone on the task force like his fucking life depends on it."*

Eret remembered that conversation. He'd walked into the task force headquarters and found Techno and Rhodys arguing over whether or not "work-leave" was a thing in the Order. It had been a pointless scuffle, but it had amused Eret enough for him to call over the few Jedi who passed by. When Techno had given him a venomous glare as he left, Eret hadn't even felt bad.

"Rhodys did actually give him time-off," Eret said aloud. "You're going to have a six-foot shadow for the next week."

Philza laughed softly. *"Yeah, well... I don't mind. He's pretty shaken up. I want to make sure he's okay."*

Eret remembered that, too. The pig Jedi had barely left the infirmary after the Belrain incident. It had taken all of Wilbur and Tommy's combined might to get Techno to so much as eat. Sometimes, when Eret had visited the infirmary in the early hours of the morning, he'd found Techno staring blankly out the window, eyes dull and Force presence even duller.

The pig Jedi had almost withered away.

But Philza didn't need to know that. His revival would herald Techno's recovery as well.

Eret cleared his throat. "Anyways, I don't want to keep you for too long," he said, trying to keep the tremble from his voice. "But I'd appreciate some advice before you go."

Philza's brow creased in a slight frown. *"Shoot."*

"I know I'm not in an ideal position. The Council doesn't care about my past since they already knew, but the task force... I can't tell if they hate me or just want me gone. Maybe both. I just... I

don't know most of them, so I have no way to convince them that I'm not a traitor to the Order. What do I do?"

Philza let out a heavy sigh, and through the holocom, it sounded like a rush of static. *"You know there's no easy answer to that, Eret,"* the other Jedi Master said quietly. *"Look... the truth is going to save you. Just answer any questions that they have, prove that you're not a bad guy in all this. If you have nothing to hide, you'll be fine."*

"I always have *something* to hide," Eret chuckled. At Philza's annoyed eye-roll, Eret broke into laughter. It felt good to laugh. "Alright, alright, I'll do that," he said, once he'd calmed down enough to talk. "Thank you, Philza. Take care of yourself, and say hello to Techno for me when he wakes up. I haven't seen him in a few days."

The corners of Philza's mouth twitched in a grin. *"Will do. I'll talk to you later."*

Philza's face disappeared from the holocom. Eret took a deep breath, and he found that his chest wasn't as tight as it had been before. Even the simple act of talking through a course of action was better than just waiting for the inevitable shitstorm.

The "inevitable shitstorm" was the Council meeting that awaited Eret later in the day. Supposedly, they wanted to make sure that Eret was still "fit to be on the task force, given the controversial nature of his history." In layman's terms, the Council wanted to see if they could shuffle Eret aside for a couple of weeks. Absolute bullshit, all of it.

Three sharp knocks rang out from the door.

Eret frowned at the closed door. A quick glance at his wrist communicator confirmed that it wasn't even 5:30. Who would be awake? "Come in," he called, waving a hand at the control panel on the wall.

The door slid open, and Dream stepped into the room, his hair an electric shade of red.

Eret cocked an eyebrow. "Good morning, Nightmare," he said dryly. "How can I help you?"

Dream closed the door behind him and stood awkwardly in Eret's little living room, hands clasped behind his back. He was silent for several moments, mouth screwed in a grimace. Finally, he broke the silence.

"I want to ask you a question."

Eret waved for Dream to sit down, but the other Jedi just shook his head slightly, continuing to shift from foot to foot. Eret barely contained a sigh. Dream wasn't going to make this easy, was he? "I'm an open book," Eret said lightly. He crossed the room and sank onto one of the small couches. "Ask away."

Dream slowly sat on the other couch, and Eret gave the blond Jedi a warm smile. Eventually, Dream lifted his face.

"Where is Kan Bo Salem?"

Eret froze. Oh, *shit*.

"I don't know," he said carefully. It was the truth, as he had no fucking clue where his former Master was, but Dream's motivations were one big question mark. Was the other Jedi going to use this against him, somehow? "He probably left the planet or went into the Underworld. I couldn't

tell you; I haven't spoken to him in years. Why?"

Dream sighed heavily, and ever so slowly, the younger Jedi slid his mask from his face. Eret watched curiously, though he was cautious not to stare at Dream's scars.

"I want to talk to him," Dream muttered. "From what you told us, it sounds like he could help. He doesn't have to come to the Temple or anything. Just... maybe he knows how the traitor can shield so well that no one can figure out who the fuck they are. I don't know. I want to know anything that'll help us catch them."

Dream's gaze was dark and stormy. If the bags under his eyes were any indication, he'd had a rough night.

Eret sat forward and steepled his fingers. "Dream, I don't think looking for Kan Bo Salem is a good idea," he said quietly. "Kabo was very knowledgeable, and I admit, he was a mentor to me. But there is a reason that his interest in Sith values got him exiled. He isn't a stable man. If, by some miracle, you manage to find him, he could be completely out of his mind. Do you want to risk that?"

Dream's eyes suddenly lit up with a manic light, and he sat forward in a rush. "What did you call him?"

Eret frowned. "Kabo. It was a nickname that I came up with for him. Were you even listening to me?"

"Kabo," Dream repeated feverishly.

The blond Jedi fell strangely quiet, and a hint of worry flashed through Eret's mind. Why did the name matter so much? It really was nothing but a stupid nickname.

Finally, Dream looked up, a broad grin plastered across his face. "I know where Kan Bo Salem is," he said excitedly.

Eret blinked several times before he trusted himself to speak. "What?" he managed eventually.

Dream let out a giddy laugh and sprung to his feet, pacing around the couch. "I didn't even make the connection until now!" he gushed. "Gods, it's so fucking obvious that it's genius! Okay, listen, there's an Underworld scholar named Kabo. He's a recluse that lives in the 3700s, and no one knows where he came from. No one! That never happens!"

"I'm the only one that would know the nickname," Eret muttered, his head spinning. "Sounds like something Salem would do."

Dream laughed again, and Eret pulled himself from his chaotic thoughts. The blond Jedi was still pacing around the room, muttering to himself about Kabo and the levels of the Underworld. Worry cut through the haze in Eret's head. He stood and planted himself directly in Dream's path. When the younger Jedi refused to stop moving, Eret physically grabbed his shoulders.

"I meant what I said, Dream," Eret warned. Dream rolled his eyes, and Eret scowled. "I am dead serious here. Salem isn't someone to be trifled with. And, by the way, I'm a little worried by the fact that you know who Kabo is. You shouldn't have connections that deep in the Underworld."

*And you're acting really bizarre. Are you okay?*

Eret didn't ask that last question aloud.



Dream brushed Eret's hands from his shoulders with a light scoff. "Come on, Eret," he said dismissively. "Everyone has an ear to the ground. I'd be more surprised if there's someone in this Temple who doesn't have *any* contacts in the Underworld."

"You're probably right," Eret said slowly. "But I didn't know that 'Kabo' existed, and I looked for Salem for months after he was exiled. How the hell did *you* know?"

Dream hesitated. Something dark flashed through his eyes, and he reached for his mask. Eret met the younger Jedi there. He held his hand under Dream's, not touching the blond's palm but making the mask unattainable.

"Thank you for your time, Master Eret," Dream muttered. His eyes stayed fixed on his mask. "I have to go. George is waiting for me."

Eret scanned the younger Jedi's face. The giddy enthusiasm was gone, and now, Dream just looked exhausted. The lines on his face belonged to someone much older than he was. The war on the Temple had irreparably aged him.

"Would finding Kan Bo Salem help the investigation?" Eret asked quietly.

Dream finally met his gaze. "Yes. With his help, maybe we can find our traitor and bring this whole thing to an end."

"Okay."

Eret took his hand away from the mask. Dream picked it up and slotted it over his face. Logically, Eret knew that Dream was wearing his regular mask because he was still at the Temple. But the white mask combined with the red hair only served to emphasize Dream's duality. George might have been the exiled one, but both had sunk their roots deep into the Underworld.

"Before you leave, I have something for you," Eret said, holding up a hand to stop Dream from leaving. The younger Jedi's mouth curved into a frown, and Eret chuckled lightly. "Relax. I'll be two seconds."

Eret hurried over to the nightstand beside his bed and dropped to his knees, carefully opening the bottom drawer. He ran his hand against the back panel until his fingers slipped into the hidden grooves. Eret pressed the pressure plate, and a small section of the drawer's bottom slid aside.

"Isn't that illegal?"

"No more illegal than you looking over my shoulder while I'm doing this," Eret muttered.

Dream's footsteps retreated. Eret allowed himself a faint smile before reaching into the hidden compartment and pulling out a small, portable recording holocom. Eret closed the drawer, then stood, turning back to Dream. The other Jedi was watching him from the table.

"If you manage to find Kabo..." Eret trailed off, his words dying in his throat. He took a steadying breath (because gods, he thought that he'd never get the chance to do this), then exhaled sharply. "If you find Salem, give him this. It would mean a lot to me. And it might make him more willing to deal with you."

Eret held out the holocom. Dream took it from his palm with gentle fingers, and Eret let out a relieved sigh as soon as the small holocom left his grasp. It felt like he was finally letting the last part of his hurt go.

"Thank you, Eret," Dream murmured. He slipped the holocom into his pocket, then carefully lifted his mask away from his face. It was just enough for Eret to see one solemn eye. "Seriously."

Eret cracked a small smile. "Take care, Dream. We need you back in one piece."

Dream nodded once, settling the mask back over his face. Then he left, his crimson cape whooshing behind him. The room felt strangely empty once the younger Jedi was gone. Eret wasn't usually one to feel loneliness or even miss the company of other people. And yet...

No matter. The Council hearing (for that was basically what it was) had been set for 11 o'clock. Eret had to be an immovable wall, ready for anything and breakable to nothing. It was a cruel way to live, yes. But Eret *had* to stay on the task force. Being sidelined was the worst thing that could ever be done to him.

Eret wandered out onto the balcony and sank into a cross-legged position. A gentle breeze kissed the side of his face.

*If they manage to find you, Kabo, Eret thought with a tired smile, don't hurt them. They need your help.*

---

Bad pressed his forehead against the cool, marble wall, desperately trying to calm his panicked breathing. Nothing worked. His heart raced out of his control, and his lungs gasped for air that didn't seem to exist. *How long do I have?* Bad wondered frantically. *Five minutes? Two? Gods, whatever it is, it's not enough. I need more time, I need more-*

*"May you be the first to burn."*

*"Mine will be the last face you ever see!"*

*"Die, you Force-sensitive piece of shit!"*

A strangled sob slipped between his lips, and Bad clamped a hand over his mouth with silent tears streaming down his face. The Force whirled around him with furious power, battering at everything he valued. There was no such thing as nobility; there was no such thing as kindness. Everything was a roaring ocean, and Bad was a broken ship being driven under the waves.

Bad tried to blink the tears out of his eyes. There were too many for him to do so, and more panic slithered through the cracks in his heart. How long did he have now? It had to be a few minutes at the most. Maybe even less than that. Seconds?

*"You might have lived like a saint, but you'll die a sinner like the rest of us!"*

*"You're not special, Jedi. We're both mortal, aren't we?"*

*"A daemon? Ha! The Order's really handing training out to anyone, huh? Hey, maybe I could become a Jedi!"*

Bad's wrist communicator lit up with tiny zeroes, and it gently buzzed against his skin. His time was up. In a few seconds, the door would open again.

Magic sparked in Bad's fingertips, and he looked down his hand with clouded eyes. He knew it was unhealthy. But the Council had no use for meltdowns, and Bad was one of the only people left to defend his friends. After the revelation about Eret the previous night, everyone was pointing

fingers at everyone. Bad's friends needed him.

His body could handle it.

Bad took as deep of a breath as his shuddering shoulders would allow. He drew four short lines in the air, and they instantly burned a soft amber.

Bad's mind screamed a warning. He ignored it.

“Δώσε μου ειρήνη,” Bad breathed. Magic coiled in his stomach then rushed through his body with vicious intensity. The sheer power of his own spell almost drove him to his knees, but Bad swallowed his nausea and steadied himself against a nearby pillar. “Είθε οι Αρχαίοι να λυπηθούν για την ψυχή μου,” he continued weakly. “Δώσε μου θεία γαλήνη.”

The spell gripped Bad's body in an invisible vice, and pure magic poured through his veins. Bad squeezed his eyes shut and tried to relax.

It was an impossible feat.

His magic gathered up every tear and every rogue emotion and crammed it into a magical cage in his chest. Bad's lungs squeezed from the lack of oxygen, but he pushed through the asphyxia. *Just a little more...*

In a heartbeat, everything disappeared. Bad took a gasping breath. He could breathe again. He wasn't crying, and his heart wasn't being torn apart by a wild beast's claws.

The solution was temporary. Even though he'd just cast the spell, Bad's emotions were already straining against their cage. But it was good enough.

The door to the Council Chambers opened.

“Master Bad, please take your place. We're almost finished.”

Bad took one last deep breath. *Here we go.*

The Council was as imposing as ever. After almost an hour with them already, Bad knew the faces and mannerisms by heart. Bad made a point of knowing the names of every Jedi in the Council (and indeed, the Order), but he'd only spoken to three of them at this meeting. With Philza still recovering and Eret on temporary probation, talking to three different Council members made Bad feel like he was walking on hot coals barefooted.

“Are you ready to resume the meeting, Bad?” Delphina asked archly. For reasons beyond Bad's understanding, she was leading the meeting. Why Eret was on probation, but *she* wasn't was beyond Bad.

But treacherous thoughts wouldn't help him.

“Yes, Master Delphina,” Bad said quietly. “If I remember correctly, Master Jahra was last speaking to me.”

Jahra gazed down at Bad with narrowed eyes, and her pure white hair rippled down her shoulders. She was Bad's least favorite of the three speakers. It took a lot to make Bad dislike someone, but Jahra checked all the boxes. She didn't like animals, she was cold to everyone without exception, and she was determined to follow the law to its last letter.

"It's good to see you recall that you are still avoiding my question," Jahra said shortly. "Allow me to refresh your memory: Where were you during the Second Temple Siege?"

*I'm not avoiding anything! You know where I was!* Bad's heart screamed.

"I was with Skeppy and Antfrost in the Southern Wing," Bad said slowly. Each word had to be careful. It was like defusing a bomb. "We were looking for Sapnap because we'd planned to have lunch together. Then the bombs went off. We got trapped by debris, and I was the only one that wasn't injured. I used a spell and the Force to keep us from being crushed until help came."

Delphina raised a thin eyebrow. "But Knights Skeppy and Antfrost were unconscious."

Bad barely contained a wince, and he wrung his hands behind his back. "They were."

"So they can't vouch for you."

"...that is the situation, yes."

"Master Bad, do you understand that you must give us something for us to believe you?"

A sob crawled its way up Bad's throat, and panic spiked in his heart. His cage was already breaking. Gods, he wouldn't be able to hold himself together for much longer. His throat was still choked by the errant sob, so Bad just nodded in response to Delphina's question and ducked his head.

"I think that's enough, Delphina. I believe him."

Bad glanced up.

The third speaker looked back at him. Master Ippu, the Amaran Jedi. Her vulpine features watched Bad with sharp intelligence, and her tail slowly twitched behind her. Bad wasn't entirely sure if Ippu liked him or not. Regardless of how she felt, her piercing, lime green eyes made Bad feel like he was a mouse being chased by a fox.

"However, I do have another question," Ippu continued softly. She curled her tail around her legs and gently smoothed down a ruffled spot before speaking again. "Assassins invaded the Temple during the Second Siege. They wore all black. Have you ever heard of anything like them before?"

Bad's heart caught in his throat.

*We're caught!* Bad's emotions screamed in panic. *Confess! Confess! Maybe we'll only be banished!*

The cage in Bad's chest rattled with desperate intent, and Bad coughed as his emotions very nearly broke out and completely overwhelmed him. A couple of the Council members gave Bad worried looks at the cough. The cage rattled harder.

"Bad?" Ippu asked. "Did you hear my question?"

"Yes, I did," Bad said hurriedly. His tongue barely got the words out. "Um, no, I've never heard of them. I don't think they're just one species, though, so I wouldn't know the name or anything like that."

Ippu's eyes narrowed ever so slightly. "I never mentioned anything of their species. Did you see one?"

*Oh, gods, no, no, no,-*

"No, I didn't," Bad croaked. Cracks were spreading across the cage. "I talked to my friends. They mentioned it. I think Dream even fought a Cathar."

A ferocious scowl creased Delphina's face, and the slim woman leaned forward in her chair. "You know something, Master Bad," she hissed. "Don't you? Are you keeping information from us?"

Panic, fear, and miserable acceptance rolled around Bad's mind like balls in a bingo cage. He was quickly approaching his breaking point. His spell was unraveling faster than his magic could patch it, and once it was gone, there would be nothing to keep Bad's emotions in check.

"I'm not hiding anything," Bad said weakly.

"You are," Jahra accused, her voice harsh. "Master Bad, reveal what you know. *Now*."

"Please, I--"

"Bad, it's okay." That was Ippu, holding up a hand to keep Delphina and Jahra from speaking. She inclined her head ever so slightly. "Don't worry. Whatever you tell us stays in confidence. You will not be prosecuted."

Delphina tossed Ippu an incredulous look, but the Amaran didn't even meet Delphina's gaze. *I think she means it*, Bad thought with the faintest glimmer of hope. *Maybe... maybe it'll be okay...*

"I have seen the assassins before," Bad said haltingly. Jahra's nostrils flared, and Bad spared a second to silently steel his resolve. "They've appeared on the back walls of the Temple before, usually over the cliffs. I'm up there all the time, so I kept running into them. They... they had different objectives. One even wanted to burn down the Temple."

"Did they?" Jahra hissed through gritted teeth. "And what became of these secret agents, Master Bad? Did you smuggle them into the Temple?"

The dying screams of the woman with the torches filled Bad's head like a crashing ocean wave. He swallowed back tears and said, "No. They all... died."

Delphina's knuckles were white on her chair's armrest. "How?"

"They killed themselves," Bad murmured. Nausea spun his head. "Well... kind of. I made sure that they couldn't hurt the Temple. That usually meant they hurt themselves instead. Sometimes they killed themselves after I caught them. I tried to talk them down, but none of them wanted to listen to--"

"You tried to talk to them?" Jahra repeated incredulously. "Master Bad, these people are waging war against us, and you tried to talk them down from their attacks?"

Bad swallowed thickly. It was taking absolutely every drop of magic he had not to let the cage in his chest break. "Yes, I did. Master Jahra, they're still--"

"That doesn't matter," Delphina interrupted silkily. She slowly rose from her chair, and fear exploded in Bad's heart. "Master Bad, you knew of these secret agents, and you didn't tell anyone? You didn't even try to get help to capture one of them?"

"N-no," Bad stuttered. "That's what I was trying to tell you. They were all dead by the time they got to me. I thought it'd be better if I--"

Delphina advanced on him, and Bad's words died in his throat. Gods, was Delphina about to kill

him? His mind was clanging alarm bells together, and he couldn't think; everything was so *loud*-

“You don't get to decide what's best for the Order, Master Bad,” Delphina purred. “That's *our* job. All that you have to do now is tell us where these people died. That's not too much to ask, hmm? Especially since you have committed an act of *treason* against the Order.”

Treason?

George.

Exile.

Bad couldn't survive the Underworld. Oh, Mother of Nox, he wouldn't even last a day. He'd have to go off-planet, and then he'd have to leave everyone behind. What would Bad even do then? Would he be a doctor somewhere? A teacher?

The cage's bars were almost broken. Repressed emotions and old memories screamed in Bad's head like pieces of a broken recording.

*Too loud, too loud, too loud-*

A hand landed on Bad's shoulder. He recoiled from the touch with a gasp and found Delphina standing directly in front of him, staring at him with murder written in her icy blue eyes.

“Master Bad, give us the locations of the dead agents,” Delphina said, head tipped to one side. Her sickly sweet smile was still plastered on her face. It made her look like a horrifying child's toy.

“You won't have to do a thing. We, the Council, will examine the Force remnants of these people and discern what is to be done next.”

*“Examine the Force remnants,”* Bad thought with hazy panic. *They're going to pull these people out of the afterlife and force them to wander forever.*

The cage broke.

Everything crashed through Bad in a terrific wave. In a split second, he was overwhelmed by everything that had been tormenting him for days.

Anxiety for his dear friends, especially the padawans and younglings.

Fear for George's fate.

Misery for all those injured.

Terror. Terror for all of them.

Bad collapsed. His shoulders heaved with sobs, and try as he might, he couldn't stop the tears. Bad buried his face in his arms and let everything tumble out. Who cared if the Council saw him cry? He wasn't perfect. He never had been. Bad had always been “one of Dream's friends,” “the daemon Jedi,” “the scholar who'd retired from the frontlines.” He wasn't cut out to be part of the Council.

“Should we help him?”

Bad vaguely heard Ippu's murmur, and had he not been too distraught to even breathe, he might have smiled. Maybe Ippu did like him.

“No. Bad will be fine. Jahra, get a party together. We're going to search the cliffs until we find the

remnants. Surely we'll be able to pull something from the echoes.”

Delphina's command broke what little control Bad had left.

“They're living beings!” Bad shouted desperately. He hauled his body up off the floor and stared at a shocked Delphina. “We're supposed to care about them!”

“They're not alive anymore, Master Bad,” Delphina said, but her voice didn't carry its usual edge. She just seemed startled by the outburst.

Her patronizing tone only fueled Bad's heartbroken anger. “It doesn't matter!” he screamed. “They were alive! If you bring them back now, they're doomed to never find rest! Are you really going to do that to someone? They weren't innocent, but they were people! They had beliefs, families, friends! They weren't our nameless enemies!”

Jahra rolled her eyes. “You care too much for them, Bad,” she sniffed. “They're dead. Their souls have already moved on. What does it matter what happens to their ashes?”

For just a moment, Bad wondered if he was in a waking nightmare. Did the Jedi Council really not understand?

“Jahra has a point, Bad,” Delphina said evenly. The Jedi Master had returned to her chair, and her temporary fury had seemingly vanished. “These people are dead. Shouldn't we use their demise to prevent the deaths of many more?”

With the last, desperate vestiges of magic that Bad possessed, he reached out into the Force and searched for a specific presence. He found it drifting in downtown Coruscant. Bad whispered for it to come to him. When he opened his eyes, he found a glowing ball of golden light hovering over his left hand.

“This is the light of the last person to die,” Bad croaked. “This is her determination and strength. She wasn't good in life. But if you call her remnants back, you'll be taking this out of the world.” Bad closed his fist, and the woman's light disappeared. “I've done this for every single one of them that died. This is the good that came out of their deaths.”

Delphina's face contorted in barely concealed rage. “You've been releasing these people's energies out into the universe?” she asked, deadly quiet.

Bad nodded wearily. He had no tears left to cry. “Yes.”

For a moment, the room was silent. Then Delphina drove her fist into her chair and the *Thud!* echoed around the room.

“You *idiot*,” Delphina hissed. “Are you aware that's against the law?” Bad nodded again, and Delphina let out an incredulous laugh. “Of course. You know, Bad, I thought that you were different from your friends. I really thought that you had a better future than they did. But you're the same. You, Dream, George, Skeppy, Sapnap, you're all the gods-damned same. Stubborn, reckless, selfish, without any thought for anyone except yourselves and your interest.”

Low, rumbling anger grew in Bad's chest. He tried to swallow it back, but the hot feeling rushed through his body, heating his fingertips until a couple of sparks flew.

“My friends aren't selfish,” Bad murmured. “They're some of the best people I know.”

Jahra scoffed. “Best people?” she repeated derisively. “I'm sure. Just like Philza is one of the best

people on the Council.”

“*He is!*” Bad shouted. Jahra frowned in evident surprise, but Bad couldn't find it in himself to care anymore. Tears flooded down his cheeks, and his hands shook. But finally, *finally*, Bad let the anger for the Jedi in front of him pour out. “He has a moral backbone! He understands that you let the dead rest! And you know what? I think he's the only person on this Council that knows what it means to be a Jedi!”

Delphina's scowl was thunderous. “Bite your tongue, *daemon*.”

Bad stood on unsteady feet. But he refused to back down from Delphina's hateful stare. “I know that's what I am,” Bad said weakly. “And my culture says that you respect and care for all life. You can't take that away from me.”

The room fell deadly silent. Bad's head was beginning to spin, clogged with too many emotions. He was using all the energy he had left to keep his eyes locked with Delphina's.

“Be silent, Delphina.”

Bad blinked, startled by the new voice. In his exhausted state, it took him several seconds to recognize the voice. Then it clicked. Bad looked to his right and found Cho-Nal sitting upright in his chair for the first time since the meeting started.

“You've crossed a line you should never have even considered,” Cho-Nal continued quietly. “Even though I don't share Master Bad's beliefs, I respect why he made the decision he did. I don't see you speaking against Jahra or Ippu for being Echani and Amaran or myself for being Besalisk. If you cannot keep your hatred for magic out of this investigation, I will not allow you to speak.”

Delphina spluttered indignantly, but Cho-Nal fixed her with a dangerous glare. The other Jedi Master immediately fell silent. Cho-Nal's gaze turned to Bad, and Bad was amazed to find the Jedi Master's face creased with sympathy.

“Bad, you may leave,” Cho-Nal said, in a tone that almost seemed gentle. “Take care of your friends and yourself. When the task force reconvenes, I'll inform you.”

Bad waited for the other shoe to drop, for some punishment for his open opposition. But there was nothing. Nothing at all.

“Yes, Master,” Bad murmured.

Cho-Nal inclined his head, so Bad turned, shuffling out of the Council Chambers. Things were absolutely silent as he left. Even as the doors closed behind him, the hallway outside the Council Chambers was void of sound.

Bad took one breath. Two.

“Bad?”

Bad looked around, too dazed to immediately pick out where the voice had come from. After a moment, his eyes found Eret standing next to a nearby pillar.

“Bad,” Eret repeated, and the other Jedi Master hurried up to him. Bad slumped into Eret's outstretched hands without a second thought. “Gods, I've got you, I've got you. Bad, what's wrong? What happened? Are you crying?”



*Am I crying?* Bad wondered blankly. He touched his cheek, and when he brought his fingers away, they were slightly damp. *Oh. I am.*

"I'm just tired," Bad slurred.

Eret's silver eyes were filled with worry. Hadn't someone just been talking about Eret's eyes?

"I can see that," Eret murmured. "Alright, listen. I have to meet with the Council right now, but Skeppy and Antfrost just walked by. I'm going to have them come and get you, okay? They'll take care of you."

Bad nodded wearily. Skeppy and Antfrost always took good care of him. They loved him.

Eret slowly guided Bad down the hallway, and Bad wandered along obediently. Between the spell and his tears, he was empty. Emotions drifted around his mind like pieces of broken glass, but Bad had nothing left to bleed or feel. He just... existed.

"Oh my gods, Bad!"

The worried voice brought an instinctive smile to Bad's face. "Skeppy," he slurred. "H-how are you?" Arms wrapped around Bad's shoulders, and he slumped into the warm embrace. "Mm... I like hugs..."

"What the hell happened?"

Anger ran a sharp undercurrent through Antfrost's words, and again, Bad smiled. His friends really cared for him, didn't they?

"I don't know. I have a meeting with the Council, but please, keep your comms open. I'll come and find you later to check on Bad."

"Yeah, of course." Skeppy's chest vibrated as he spoke, and Bad giggled a little at the strange feeling. "I'll bring him to my room. Ant, help me."

New, fuzzier arms slung under Bad's shoulders and pulled him upright. Bad didn't have the energy to keep his eyes open any longer, so he just let his friends guide him. He was safe with them.

Bad was always safe with his friends.

---

"Come on," George hissed. "You have to act like you belong here. Where's the swagger that I saw yesterday?"

Clay glared at him, and George's stomach rippled. Even after a full day of seeing Clay's eyes, George couldn't get over how expressive they were. He'd forgotten all about that after being away for so long.

"The swagger is gone because I'm fucking tired," Clay snapped. "We've been walking around all day. How the hell did you do this when you lived down here?"

George chuckled dryly. "I didn't. I stayed in my shop and made my customers come to me."

Clay snorted, but his shoulders had pulled back, and his eyes were alert once again. George had successfully distracted him for the time being.

“Look, I just have to talk to one more person,” George said placatingly. “There’s an amazing picenti stall next to his shop. We can grab something to eat before we head to the hub.”

Clay scrunched up his nose. “What’s picenti?”

“Uh...” George considered his memories of the greenish-yellow fish delicacy for several seconds before cautiously answering Clay’s question with, “It’s the best of Underworld cuisine. It’s run by three different vendors, and they’re all going to be drowning in credits until they die. Come on. We’re almost there.”

George strode through the crowd with new purpose, and the flow of traffic quickly pulled him in. He wove through the minuscule openings that provided themselves, and, thank the gods, Clay followed him as if he knew what he was doing. Years of friendship allowed George to see the hesitations in Clay’s movements, but no one else would notice. Not when Clay was dressed as Nightmare.

That did pose a question, though. Why the hell did Clay have such a popular alias? 404 was well-known because he serviced everyone’s needs, and any attempts to pay him off or sway him to a side would result in a glare and an electric staff to the neck. 404 was well-known for neutrality and talent.

What reputation did Nightmare have?

George broke through the crowd and found a squat blue building waiting for him. He shook all pondering of Nightmare out of his head (after all, he could just ask Clay later) and strode across the street.

A red light winked at George from the shadows of the rafters as he approached the door. *There’s a scanner at our 3 o’clock*, George noted, projecting the thought to Clay. *Is Nightmare on any Underworld watch lists that would get you flagged by his system?*

*I don’t think so. I don’t even know whose shop this is.*

*All the better for us. You get to make a good first impression.*

George rapped on the door four times. Clay stood silently at his side, emerald eyes flicking between George’s fist and the slat on the door. The taller man was clearly on edge. George only prayed that Clay wouldn’t react rashly.

As soon as George finished his last knock, the slat on the door slid open.

“What do you want?” a harsh voice asked.

*State your name.* “404,” George said.

“Nightmare,” Clay chimed in with a slight purr.

The slat on the door clanged shut, and a shiver shot down George’s spine. Gods, what was wrong with him? Clay was playing a character. There was absolutely nothing... dirty... about...

The door flew open. George gladly welcomed the interruption.

A stick-thin imp that seemed too frail to possess such a worn voice stood in the doorway. As its eyes landed on George, a broad grin spread across its wiry face.

“404,” it laughed. “I haven't seen you in some time, hmm? People were starting to wonder if you'd finally gone and died somewhere. Fucked with the wrong boss, hmm?”

George smiled thinly. “I'm still alive, Odd,” he said, trying to keep the distaste out of his voice and only barely succeeding. “Is he in?”

Odd slammed the door shut as soon as Clay stepped inside. If the little imp noticed the scathing glare that Clay threw it, it didn't react. “Yes, she's in,” Odd said brightly. “Should I let her know that 404 has finally come back?”

George inclined his head slightly, both as an acknowledgment of the pronouns and as his response. Odd clapped its hands in delight and ran for a solid steel door at the back of the room. Once the door had crashed shut behind it, Clay turned to George with a razor-sharp gaze.

“We're locked in,” the taller man hissed.

George glanced behind them. The front door was latched in three different places. “Yup,” he said, popping the “P.” “That's the Underworld for you.” Clay scoffed, and George chuckled at his friend's disdain. *Look, you don't have say a word unless she speaks directly to you. I'll be quick, okay?*

Clay's eyes softened a fraction. *Okay. Don't get us killed.*

George grinned. But, before he could respond, the steel door was tossed open once again with the accompanying bellow of “404!”

The dim shop was suddenly flooded with amber lights. George couldn't help but smile as a dark green Sluissi slithered out of the backroom, arms spread wide with jovial enthusiasm. As she got closer, it became evident that some of the dark lines on her scales were deep scars. There was even a new one over her right eye.

“Always good to see you, Ejas,” George greeted. He held out a hand, and Ejas shook it vigorously. “I've only been gone a couple of weeks. How'd you already almost lose an eye?”

Ejas roared with laughter. “It's the way of this world, 404,” she boomed. “It's the risk we take waking up every day. It's wonderful to see you again. Who is this?”

George turned to Clay, who had been standing a step back, and nodded ever so lightly. Immediately, Clay stepped into character. George couldn't help but stare at the taller man strolled up to Ejas with feline grace and charisma.

“Nightmare,” Clay said breezily, holding out a hand. “It's a pleasure to meet you, Master Technician.”

Ejas immediately shook the offered hand. “You honor me, stranger,” she laughed. “I am Ejas L'sehl. I cannot match 404 for skill, but if you have a project too big for his shop, I have the space and power to get it done.” Ejas glanced back to George, and a wicked glint flickered in her pure black eyes. “It is wonderful to see that 404 has finally found a lover. The gods know the Underworld is unforgiving on both body and soul.”

*What the fuck,* George thought, unable to conjure a more intelligent response.

Clay, however, smiled with his eyes and drawled, “I would thank you for your blessing if I weren't so vain. 404 is better in bed than most down here.”

*WHAT THE FUCK*, George repeated, the wires in his brain sparking as he tried to figure out what in the name of Tibulta was going on.

Ejas once again roared with laughter. “You have a good companion, 404,” she said, slapping George's shoulder. The slap brought George out of his thoughts, and he gave the Sluissi a dazed smile. “Now then, enough pleasantries. What can I do for you? Are we smuggling? Bribing? Oh, I just received a shipment of new electrodes if it is a kidnapping you wish to accomplish.”

“None of the above, actually,” George said. His voice was blessedly steady. Ejas' eyes glittered with curiosity, so George reached into the pocket of his cloak and pulled out a thin circuit board. “Do you know what this is?”

Ejas' forked tongue flicked in and out of her mouth. “That is an Old Empire TIE fighter motherboard,” the Sluissi said, her voice dripping with technical lust. “That is... very rare, 404. You know how badly I wish to have one.”

George cracked a conspiratorial smile. “And that's why I'm here, Ejas. Information and one tool for the motherboard.”

“Always a man of action,” Ejas said, chuckling lowly. “I appreciate that about you, 404. Now, quickly, tell me what technology I am giving up in exchange for that beauty.”

George glanced around to make sure that Odd was nowhere to be found (the little imp had a penchant for snatching things of value), then handed Ejas the motherboard for inspection. Ejas nodded her thanks and began running her fingers over the metal, eyes glittering with analytical intelligence. Eventually, she handed it back.

“It is real,” Ejas agreed. “And I thank you for your trust. But you leave me in suspense, 404. What am I paying for that? My soul?”

“Your soul is worth less than the doors to this place,” George drawled, and Ejas chuckled. “I want my charger back, and I want to know where Kabo is.”

Ejas' tongue flickered out of her mouth. “Hmm... one of those requests is very easy, and the other is not. Kabo just passed through the other day. He is two levels below us, in the Diamond District. Expensive tastes for a slummer, eh? As for your charger... I scrapped it.”

George was actually dumbstruck. Once he finally stopped reeling, he demanded, “You scrapped it?!”

“It was for a job!” Ejas protested. “The customer needed two-sided bolts, and I thought you were dead!”

“I've been gone for *two weeks!*” George howled. Usually, he wouldn't be so melodramatic over a material possession. But that had been *his* charger! Not only had he lent it to Ejas with the promise of its safe return, but he'd also made so many modifications to the little beauty! It could fully charge a dead ship's battery in a matter of minutes!

Then slender fingers slipped over George's shoulder and gently pressed against his cheek. A warm breath puffed against the back of his neck, and George's mind completely blanked out as he realized that Clay was very, *very* close. *What the fuck are you doing?* George tried to demand. But he couldn't muster the focus required to project his thought, so it just bounced around his head with the rest of his jumbled thoughts.

Slowly, Clay pushed George's head to the left. George let himself be directed and prayed to all the

gods that his face didn't display his complete and utter confusion.

“What about that?” Clay asked quietly, his voice brushing against George's ear.

George swallowed against the strangled feeling in his throat and scanned the wall for whatever the hell Clay was talking about. Then he spotted it. A slim, silver handle hanging on a hook, with two distinctive notches in its tip.

A lightsaber.

*Good eye*, George thought incredulously.

Clay's eyes crinkled at the corners. *Thank you. You've been doing most of the talking, so I thought I should pull my weight.*

George shook his head in disbelief (which had the added bonus of shaking his mismatched thoughts away) and turned back to Ejas. “Fine,” he sighed. “Since you *scrapped my charger-*” Ejas had the grace to look mildly guilty- “I'll take something else. That silver handle up there.”

Ejas' eyes immediately darted to the handle in question, and she made a noise somewhere between a chuckle and a scoff. “You may have it,” she said, plucking the handle from its hook. “But I warn you, I have tried everything. It has been years, and this little thing refuses to work for me. I don't even know what it is, and to be honest with you, I do not care anymore.”

“I'll still take it,” George said lightly. Ejas shrugged and dropped the handle into his outstretched hand. As soon as it landed against his palm, power thrummed through his fingertips. “It's in good shape. Very nice, Ejas. Our deal is satisfied.”

George secured the lightsaber handle in one of his pockets, then handed Ejas the motherboard. The Sluissi took it with a giant smile. She tucked the motherboard into one of the many belts around her midriff and patted it gently.

“It's good to do business again, 404,” Ejas said, and a fond smile touched her face. “I wish all my customers were like you.”

“Only the vendors know proper etiquette,” George agreed with a long-suffering sigh, and both of them chuckled. “It's good to see you too, Ejas. I'm not dead, alright? Stop spreading the rumor. I'll be back soon.”

Ejas tipped an invisible hat. “Yes, yes, you're not dead. I look forward to your return. It was a pleasure to meet you as well, Nightmare. Feel free to come back whenever you'd like, with or without 404.”

Clay dipped in a dramatic bow, and Ejas burst out laughing for the fourth time in as many minutes. Then the latches on the front door unlocked with a thud. George nodded the Sluissi Technician one more time before heading out of the shop, back into the dim Underworld light. As soon as Clay's feet left the threshold, the door slammed shut.

“You have a lot of interesting friends,” Clay noted lightly. “If only they weren't Underworld traders.”

“If only,” George murmured. “Alright, well, I have what I want. I think I promised you dinner. Come on.”

True to his word, George led Clay down the street to the Underworld-famous picenti stall. While

standing in line, George instinctively scanned the hoards thronging around them. A couple of thieves, some smugglers, and the most obvious spy George had ever seen all wandered around. Their eyes never stopped moving. *And*, George thought tiredly, slapping the searching fingers of a pickpocket away, *neither do their hands*.

After a couple minutes of waiting, George and Clay made it to the front of the line and ordered two bowls of picenti. The vendor, a muscular Twi'lek, showed George the food, then held out a hand for payment. George counted out the credits.

"More," the vendor growled.

George scowled. "This is how much it costs."

"More for humans."

"No."

The vendor stared at him for a second. Eventually, the Twi'lek accepted the money with a lot of loud grumbling. When he turned back from his register, two patches were poorly concealed in his palms.

George waited until the vendor reached for his and Clay's food. Then he whipped out his staff from under his cloak and slammed it across the Twi'lek's knuckles, startling a pained howl from the vendor. "I don't feel like being poisoned today," George said lowly, leaning over the stall to stare Twi'lek dead in the eyes. "Get rid the patches, or I take off a finger."

The Twi'lek's eyes went wide with panic. He nodded too many times and quickly withdrew his hands, ripping the poison patches off his hands. George smiled sweetly.

"Thank you."

A moment later, George and Clay were on their way down the street, bowls of picenti in hand. George's mouth watered at the tantalizing smell, and with a start, he realized just how much he'd missed Underworld cuisine. There was just something about street urchins blending their cultures and recipes together with reckless abandon.

"That was incredible."

George glanced up at Clay's soft murmur. The taller man was staring at the bowl in his hands. "What was?" George asked, confused.

Clay tipped his head, and he met George's gaze with unfocused eyes. "You didn't even flinch when you were dealing with that vendor," he said quietly. "Or with Ejas. You just... dealt with them. No hesitation, no... fear. You weren't afraid of them at all."

"Uh... I guess I wasn't."

The two of them fell quiet. They'd already decided on a trader's hub (the Underworld's equivalent of a hotel) to stay at, so George let his feet subconsciously guide him. Which left his mind uncomfortably free for thinking.

George had never really thought of his interactions with the vendors and merchants as anything special. After all, customer service and generally dealing with people had been his whole job for the past four years. But, then again... if George had never been a Jedi, and he suddenly went to the surface and saw Clay doing Jedi stuff, he would be astounded.

Was that how Clay felt, watching George maneuver through the Underworld as he had for years?

It was a question George resolved to ask at a later date. Personal business was best discussed away from the eyes and ears of the general masses.

“Are you going to eat your picenti?” George asked, breaking the silence.

Clay glanced at him, and one graceful eyebrow lifted. “Do you expect me to take my mask off right now? In the middle of the street?”

Oh. Right.

“Okay, well, we're almost at the hub,” George grumbled. “Give me your bowl. We'll get a better reception if one of us is holding both of them.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really, why would I- just trust me on this.”

Clay handed over his bowl. George settled the lids over both meals, then tucked the two bowls under his arm. He rolled his neck, squared his shoulders, and strode the rest of the way to the trader's hub that rose above the hustle and bustle.

The inside of the hub was even cleaner than the outside. George looked around for any signs of vermin or mold but found neither. Additionally, the main floor was filled with customers, laughing and talking while clanking enormous mugs together.

Well, well. It looked like they'd landed a jackpot.

“Where to?” Clay whispered.

George jerked his chin at the left corner of the room. “Only place with a credit register,” he explained.

The two of them carefully wove through the crowd. George made sure that no one snatched their bags (or swiped their picenti), while Clay acted as a deterrent for stealing said items. It was a surprisingly effective system. In fact, by the time they reached the credit register, George was in a good mood. This was the best hub experience he'd had in months.

“One room,” he told the man behind the register. “Two beds, one window. Pay per night.”

A look of relief briefly flashed over the man's face before he began tapping on a holopad by his right hand. George smiled faintly. With so many patrons, the man had probably had to deal with a considerable amount of uninformed customers.

“We've got one on the north side and another on the east,” the man rasped after a moment. “Which one?”

“East,” George said. “Any neighbors?”

A small grin cracked the man's serious composure. “Only on the north side.”

George chuckled and accepted the electronic card that the man held out. The street rooms of hotels and hubs were nothing but tourist traps, even in the Underworld. *Plus*, George thought, as he doled out payment for one night in their room, *they cost two organs and an arm. I barely paid anything for this one.*

With the card in hand, George and Clay headed up to the second floor of the hub and began scanning the numbers etched onto the doors. After a few minutes of looking, George found their room (3-2) at the very end of the right hallway. Just how he liked it.

Their boarding also surpassed expectations. There were two beds tucked in a small room to their right. A few chairs had been tossed together to make a living room, and a sturdy-looking table acted as a kitchen. It wasn't luxury, but it was certainly better than many hubs in the Underworld. Most importantly, it was clean.

"Welcome to our home for the next four days," George announced brightly.

Clay snorted and slipped George's bag from his shoulder, making a beeline for the bedroom. "I can't complain. This is nicer than I thought it'd be." Clay's voice disappeared around the wall, and for a moment, he was silent. Then: "Oh, there's a bathroom in here, and it has a shower. That's nice. I thought I'd just have to be dirty until we got back."

George chuckled, setting the bowls of picenti on the kitchen table. "I'd check the water if I were you," he called. "You can get some nasty surprises if you don't." Clay shouted something back, but the taller man's voice was drowned out by the general hum of Underworld traffic. George decided he didn't care enough to respond and sat, opening his bowl of picenti. The smell tickled George's taste buds in a way that surface food just couldn't match.

For the next couple of minutes, George greedily devoured the food. A full day of not eating made him absolutely ravenous. Then the floorboards creaked, and George reluctantly paused his inhalation.

"Were you hungry, Georgie?"

George rolled his eyes. "No, not at all. Don't call me-"

The words died before he could say them. George had made the mistake of looking at Clay while speaking to him, and now, he didn't know what to do.

Clay had shed most of his Nightmare outfit and instead just wore a black, sleeveless tunic and loose, flowing pants. His feet were bare, and his hair once again fell around his face in golden waves. He must have taken off the holographic node.

That wasn't the strange part. The majority of Clay's arms and legs were exposed, but every single square inch was wrapped in bandages. None of the bandages were bloodied or torn, but they covered every patch of exposed skin that Clay could have had, right down to the spaces between his toes.

But even the bandages weren't why George was dumbfounded. No, it was Clay's face. The taller man still wore his black Nightmare mask. In the amber lights of their room, George finally saw Clay's scars.

The three deepest ones sliced across Clay's face in a vicious slash, running from his right temple to his left cheekbone. Two more decorated the bridge of Clay's nose, and one cut through the taller man's left eyebrow. Other, smaller scars scratched lines into the Jedi Master's skin, but those were mostly faint and thin, clearly cleansed by time. But the three scars across Clay's face... those would never fade.

"So what is this, again?" Clay asked, sinking into the chair opposite George.

George's customer service training immediately kicked in, overriding his shock and forcing words



out of his mouth. "It's called picenti. I have no idea what planet it's from, but I know it's made with fish, some kind of special sauce, and three kinds of off-planet vegetables. I've had it for years, and it hasn't killed me yet, so I'm pretty sure it's safe."

Clay chuckled. "Not for lack of trying, huh?"

The image of the vendor's terrified face popped into George's head, and he allowed himself a small smile. "Yeah."

George went back to eating. Clay's eyes just rested on the bowl in front of him, his fork balanced in his right hand.

George only lasted a couple of minutes before the silence got to him.

"I can eat in the other room if you want to take your mask off," George offered. As soon as the words were out of his mouth, he regretted them. Gods, that had sounded so fucking awkward. But he didn't want to take the offer back, so George just clamped his mouth shut to make sure nothing else escaped and kept eating.

After a brief infinity, Clay spoke.

"No, it's okay. You've already seen both halves of my face, just not at the same time. It's fine."

George glanced up. Clay took his mask off.

The three scars continued down to Clay's jaw, where they finally petered off into smaller ones that shattered down his neck like shards of broken ice. Two more gouges were carved into Clay's right cheek, and a tiny scar was scratched onto his bottom lip.

Beautiful, emerald eyes met George's gaze. "What do you think?"

George let himself look at Clay's whole face once, then ducked his head. "I think this picenti is really fucking good. It's a shame that the vendor tried to kill us, though."

A couple of hours later, the two of them turned in the night. George had already done a preliminary sweep of the room to make sure it was bug-free, so he was relatively comfortable getting a few hours of rest. George claimed the right-hand bed and watched as Clay turned off the lights and tucked their more valuable items back into the respective bags.

Clay's face wasn't extraordinary, per se. It had thinned out a little, thanks to puberty's final growth spurt, but other than that, it was still Clay's face.

So why did the scars made George feel so queasy?

The answer finally came to him when Clay sat down on the edge of his bed. The taller man let out a relieved sigh as he sank into the mattress, and his lips quirked in a small smile. George vividly remembered when the Jedi Master used to smile all the time, without anything impairing his face.

George was the reason that Clay wore a mask, both inside the Temple and outside of it.

George was why Clay had bandages wrapped around his shoulders, and he was repulsed by physical contact.

George had turned his best friend into a shell of his former self.

"Stop it."

The quiet command startled down George out of his thoughts. He blinked tears he hadn't realized he was crying out of his eyes and found Clay watching him with a warm smile.

“You didn't do this to me,” Clay murmured. The taller man ran a finger down his left cheek, tracing one of the three scars. “You didn't force me to leave the Temple and fight Underworld mob bosses. I chose to.”

“What if I'd never left?” George whispered back.

Clay was silent for a long, long moment. “We'll never know. All we've got to work with is what happened, and... I'm sorry, George, but I'm not going to let you invalidate what I did. I made my choices. You have to live with them, too.”

That was... not what George had expected. And it also wasn't a way that he'd ever thought before.

*I'm sorry.*

Clay's eyes were bright in the darkness. “It's okay. Go to sleep. You had to deal with a lot more shit than I did today.”

George blinked blearily, as he still had more that he wanted to say, but Clay's outline was getting fuzzier and fuzzier against the darkness of the room. So George reluctantly tucked himself under the sheets and set his brain to “alarm mode.” His last thought before he drifted off to sleep wasn't his, but Clay's.

*Don't worry, I'll still be here when you wake up. I'm never leaving you again.*

## Chapter End Notes

Thank you so, so much for reading! If you are so inclined, please leave a comment and let me know what you think! Your feedback means the world to me <3

To everyone who has read this far, no matter where you hopped onto this journey: thank you. This story has made the past three months of my life much better than it would have been otherwise, and I'm glad that this Star Wars AU has brought a little joy to your lives as well. 2021 is gonna be a good one, y'all. Happy New Year's.

The second update of this week is coming on Saturday (Jan 2!), so I will see you all at the start of the new year! Have a great couple of days!

## Depths of the Earth, Part 3

### Chapter Notes

Me, while writing the first draft: Ah, yes, this will be a shorter chapter. After all, it's not the finale, and 10k words is a lot to give my readers each update-

\*final document screams in 11.5k\*

Lol I did go a bit over my word count expectation, but let me tell y'all, I am so, so happy with this chapter! It was so much fun for me to write, and I really hope that y'all find it fun, too! There's an Underworld adventure in this one that I think you'll particularly like

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Tommy swore loudly as the stack of books in his arms tumbled to the ground. A couple of nearby Jedi shot him horrified looks, but Tommy ignored them and quickly gathered the leather-bound novels up. New tears scratches decorated some of the covers. Gods, Bad was going to kick his ass when he returned the books.

Well, in reality, Bad wouldn't do anything except give him a stern look and a mild warning. But the disappointment radiating off of the daemon Jedi would be punishment enough.

Speaking of Bad... the Jedi Master had been off when Tommy had collected the books from him. The daemon Jedi's mind had been clouded and... melancholy. Bad usually gave off an entire melting pot of emotions, but he had definitely been more sad than usual. Maybe something had happened.

Regardless, it wasn't Tommy's problem.

Tommy shrugged, pushed thoughts of Bad out of his head, and gathered the books back into his arms. With his precious cargo secure, Tommy continued his journey across the Temple.

When Tommy had heard that Tubbo was stable, his first instinct had been to sprint across the Temple to see his best friend. However, Wilbur had been adamant that he waited a day. (*"Tubbo has been through a lot, Tommy," Wilbur had said patiently. "Give him some time to breathe."*)

Though Tommy had cussed Wilbur out at the time (and gotten a cuff on the ear for his trouble), he understood the logic. Tubbo *had* suffered a lot of trauma.

The image of the bone protruding out of Tubbo's arm made Tommy shudder. He never wanted to see another broken bone as long as he lived.

After a couple more minutes of walking, Tommy finally made it to the infirmary. He spared a second to readjust the books in his arms, then shuffled into the building. Tommy knew the vague direction of Tubbo's room, but not the exact location. It shouldn't be a problem. Maybe he'd run into someone who could help him.

Right after Tommy turned the corner, he ran into somebody.

“Oh, fuck,” Tommy hissed, both from the situational irony and because his stack of books was on the floor. Again. One of the covers crackled as it landed, and Bad's distressed wail echoed around Tommy's head. “Come on, really?” he snapped at the unnamed person *he'd* run into. “This is fucking history I'm carrying. Watch where you're fucking going.”

“You really shouldn't stay stuff like that, Tommy. It's a miracle that Wilbur keeps you around.”

Tommy glared up at the Jedi standing over him. Techno met his scowl with an amused smile, and internally, Tommy let out a sigh of relief. He would have gotten into so much fucking trouble had he spoken to anyone except Technoblade that way. He had to watch his mouth. But the pig Jedi didn't need to know how nervous he'd been. Tommy sneered and retorted with,

“It's a miracle that you graduated from being a padawan.”

Techno's smile got a little sharper. “And you think it's gonna be easier for you?”

Tommy hesitated. Then he remembered his personal rule and plastered a boisterous grin on his face. “Yeah, well, I have a couple of advantages over you, Technoblade. I'm better than you were at my age, don't even try to deny it. I'm stronger, faster, smarter, and better-looking.”

“Uh-huh.”

Techno stooped and helped Tommy gather up the fallen books. Tommy grumbled loudly, but he appreciated the gesture more than he wished to admit.

For a couple of silent seconds, the two of them both crouched on the ground, carefully picking up the leather novels. But, finally, Tommy couldn't contain his burning curiosity. “How's Philza?” he asked quietly.

Techno's smile was small but bright. “He's good. He's sleeping right now. The droids are doing some scans. He's gonna go into surgery tonight, and by tomorrow, he should have his prosthetic.”

“Already?” Tommy asked, surprised.

“You sound disappointed,” Techno noted mildly.

“No, no, I was just...” Tommy was, in fact, relieved to hear that Philza was already on the road to recovery. The Temple wasn't the same without Philza's brilliant Force presence touching the edges of Tommy's mind. “It just seems like they're moving fast, that's all. As long as he's okay, I don't care what they do.”

Techno gave a noncommittal hum, and not for the first time, Tommy wondered if the pig Jedi had better mental sensitivity than he let on. After all... Techno's mental shields were nearly impenetrable. Even for Tommy.

The two of them quickly gathered up the books. Tommy stood and braced himself against the wall as Techno began to hold out his stack.

The pig Jedi paused. “Where are you taking this stuff?” Techno asked absently, examining the cover of one of the books. “‘Zoology’ and ‘Ethology’? ‘Melittology’? I don't know what any of this is. Why do you have these?”

“It's for Tubbo,” Tommy grunted. “He likes this stuff. *Please* just give me the books.”

Techno looked from Tommy to the books, then back to Tommy. A smile slowly spread across the pig Jedi's face. "Eh, you know what? I'll take these. You don't even know where Tubbo's room is."

Tommy opened his mouth to protest. But the books in his arms were heavier than his ego, so he reluctantly shut his mouth and ignored Techno's quiet chuckle.

"Alright. Come on."

Techno started off down the hallway, and Tommy strode after him. Given that Tommy was almost as tall as the pig Jedi, it was easy enough for him to keep up. But, as he watched Techno part the crowds like he was physically repelling them, Tommy silently admitted that Techno had an aura of authority he could never match. Even though the pig Jedi was the least likely person to lead anything, ever.

"Are you sure you should be leaving Philza alone?" Tommy hesitantly, after a few minutes of walking. "I mean... he's not exactly been safe lately."

Techno's shoulders visibly tightened, but his voice was level when he spoke. "Yeah, he's fine. The only people working on him right now are droids."

"Droids can be reprogrammed."

Techno huffed sharply, glancing over his shoulder. Something in the pig Jedi's blood-red eyes made Tommy shudder. "Do you want my help?" Techno asked flatly. "Because I can drop them right here and let you carry them the rest of the way."

"No, no, I'm sorry for bringing up the droid thing," Tommy said hurriedly. Techno grunted, but the noise didn't sound aggressive. Relief washed away Tommy's momentary panic. "Wilbur wanted me to ask you something, by the way. I don't remember what it was."

"So why are you telling me that he wanted to ask me something?"

Tommy scowled. Gods, Technoblade could be *so* hard to talk to. "I'm saying that so you can call him or something!" he snapped. "I'm going to be hanging out with Tubbo! I can't be bothered to call him up! I mean, he'd probably get mad at me, so, y'know."

"That sounds right." Techno glanced over his shoulder again, and this time, a smile touched his face. "Remind me why Wilbur lets you out of the padawan quarters in the morning. I really don't see the point."

"Uh..."

In truth, Tommy had spent the night crashed on Wilbur's couch. As well as the night before that... and the night before that. Ever since the Second Temple Siege, Tommy had found the barren corridors of the Padawan Quarters far too empty for his tastes. If Tubbo wasn't there, then Tommy really had no reason to stay. Besides... that first night after the siege, when Tommy asked Wilbur if he could stay, relief had flashed over his Master's face. Tommy had a sneaking suspicion that Wilbur didn't want to leave him alone any more than he wanted to be alone.

Tommy blinked himself out of his head and found Techno giving him a knowing look. Again, Tommy couldn't help but wonder if the pig Jedi was more perceptive than he let on.

"Doesn't matter now," Techno said dismissively. "We're almost to Tubbo's room. Are your arms okay?"

Tommy grumbled in response. He just wanted to get to Tubbo.

Then a wave of emotion bowled Tommy over like he was standing in the middle of the ocean. Tommy gulped for air, and he barely managed to gasp “*Techno*” before his legs gave out from under him.

The pig Jedi's arm shot out, and he caught Tommy just before he collapsed. “Yeah, I felt it,” Techno muttered. Tommy vaguely wondered how the fuck the Jedi Master had moved so quickly. “I can't read it from here, Tommy. I need you to focus.”

“No,” Tommy moaned. The wave was battering him with iron fists. It was all fear. A terrible rush of fear that seeped into his bones and threatened to make him burst out crying. “No, Techno, please, this is terrible. I don't know what's going on. I don't even know who-”

His words died in his throat. Now that Tommy was focusing, he felt the fear more clearly. He heard the sobs of its owner and the silent pleas for help.

Tubbo?

Oh, gods, *Tubbo*.

“Where's Tubbo's room?” Tommy demanded, scrambling back to his feet and ignoring the terrible pounding in his head.

Techno's eyes widened. Then the pig Jedi grabbed Tommy's wrist and took off down the hallway, dropping his books as he went. Tommy did the same and allowed the Jedi Master to pull him. As they ran, Tommy pushed his abilities to their limits, straining to feel anything from Tubbo other than primal terror.

There was nothing else to feel. Tubbo's mind screamed as if he was dying.

“How much further?” Tommy gasped. His lungs were taking a severe beating, assaulted by both Techno's relentless pace and the unfamiliar emotions that clogged his chest.

Techno didn't slow down. “Two more hallways. Try to calm him down.”

“How? I can't-”

“Yes, you can. *Try*.”

Had it been any other situation, Tommy probably would have argued the point. But this wasn't the time for posturing. Tommy reached his mind out as far as it could go. Tubbo's presence was bright, but it was ravaged by the winds of fear. *Hang on, Tubbo*, Tommy thought, and he tried to wrap Tubbo's mind in peace the same way that Wilbur often did for his. *I'm here, Tubbo, it's okay. We're coming*.

The maelstrom of emotions surrounding the other padawan weakened slightly, and coherent thought returned to Tubbo's mind. Among the bunch, Tommy picked out things like *Dream, please come home, Tommy?* and *Is Philza going to be okay? He has to be okay*.

It wasn't much of an improvement. But it was better than nothing.

Techno swung them around the last corner and came to a screeching stop. Tommy let out a string of muttered curses as he crashed into Techno's back. He opened his mouth to express them more loudly, but Techno held up a rigid finger.

“Shut up,” the pig Jedi hissed. “Do you feel that?”

Tommy did as he was told for about three seconds before realizing that he couldn't “shut up” and answer the question simultaneously. Tommy scowled (why did Techno and Wilbur both insist on making completely contradictory statements back to back?), then snapped, “No, I don't feel anything. Shouldn't we get to Tubbo?”

Techno was silent for a moment. “Something's wrong,” he said eventually, voice hushed. “Reach into Tubbo's room. It's right across the hallway.”

“Shouldn't we check on him first?” Tommy demanded again. “That is my friend in there, Technoblade, and it sounds like he's fucking dying. We should-”

*“Just do it, Tommy.”*

Tommy gritted his teeth against the venom on his tongue and reluctantly stretched his mind into Tubbo's room. He found the other padawan still locked in terror and the rest of the room empty. Just as Tommy was about to snap at Techno that nothing was wrong, he felt it. There was a slight imbalance in the air, like the power that lingered after someone used the Force. But Tubbo's room was empty. Wasn't it?

“You're right,” Tommy mumbled. “There's something in there. Like death echoes, but without the death.”

Techno made a face. “So... there's echoes?”

“That's what I fucking said, innit? What are we going to do? I did what you told me to do, Technoblade, now what are we going to do about Tubbo?”

The pig Jedi glanced at Tubbo's closed door, and Tommy could see the gears turning in the Jedi Master's head. Techno was many things that Tommy didn't like, but he wasn't an idiot. Techno would come up with a plan.

Finally, Techno rested a hand on his lightsaber. “We walk in,” the pig Jed muttered. “Stay behind me.”

*That's a terrible plan,* Tommy thought frantically. But Techno was already advancing on the door, so Tommy hurried after the Jedi Master and drew his lightsaber. Better two blades than one.

The door to Tubbo's room slid open, and Techno strode inside. For a horrible moment, Tommy's brain presented him with all the tragedies that could have occurred. Tubbo could already be dead, somehow, or someone could have broken in. Then Techno stepped aside, and Tommy wilted in relief.

The room was empty. Tubbo was asleep on his bed, face screwed into a silent scream.

“He's having a nightmare!” Tommy said, relieved, then immediately winced at how cheerful he sounded. “Should we wake him up?” Techno's blood-red eyes were fixed on Tubbo's face. There was something dark in the lines of his face, and worry crept back into Tommy's heart. “Techno? Which one of us is gonna wake him up?”

Techno blinked, seemingly startled, then glanced over at Tommy. “Oh, uh, you do it. You're closer to him.”

Tommy needed no further invitation. He dashed to his best friend's side and gently shook Tubbo's

shoulders. "Tubbo?" he called quietly. "C'mon, it's me, you have to wake up. Your mind is going fucking insane, and I really need you to wake up before something bad happens."

For a moment, nothing happened. Then Tubbo burst back to life, taking in a gasping breath and shooting upright. Tommy barely avoided being smacked in the nose, but he couldn't even find it in himself to be annoyed.

"Where am I?" Tubbo babbled. "You can't make me-!" The brown-haired boy blinked once, twice, then looked at Tommy with evident relief. "Tommy. It is you. I thought..."

"It's me, big man," Tommy chuckled, trying not to let his relief show. "That was some fucking nightmare. Are you okay?"

Tubbo frowned. "Nightmare? No, I-" Sudden terror crossed the other padawan's face, and he nodded a little. "Yeah. Nightmare. I remember now."

Tommy patted his best friend's arm, then reached for the stack for the books that he knew would cheer Tubbo up. Then he remembered that he didn't have the books. They were abandoned somewhere near the entrance of the infirmary.

"Oh, fucking hell," Tommy grumbled. When Tubbo gave him a confused look, he elaborated. "I was bringing you stuff, and I left it somewhere. Technoblade, can you go get the books?"

"Huh?" Techno looked dazed, as if he'd been completely lost in thought. Then his gaze sharpened. "Oh, yeah, sure."

The pig Jedi left the room, and Tommy turned his full attention to Tubbo. The brown-haired boy's icy eyes were bright.

"Books?" Tubbo asked, hopefully.

Tommy grinned. "Yeah, lots of books, big man. I talked to Master Bad and got everything I could from the Archives. They're all classics, too, so there won't be any annotations from those stupid ancient Masters. I don't know what the half the shit I got is, but I think you'll like it."

Tubbo was positively beaming, and the sight did Tommy's heart good. "Thank you. I didn't-" Fear flashed through Tubbo's eyes. Tommy frowned, but before he could say anything, Tubbo began talking again. "I think I need to change my IV. I can do the first part myself, but I need a nurse to do the rest of it. I, uh..." Tubbo grinned sheepishly. "I got banned from using my 'call for help' button after I made them bring me a ton of cakes. Can you grab a nurse for me?"

The story made Tommy chuckle, but an odd sense of suspicion sat at the back of his mind. "Yeah, sure."

Tommy wandered over to the door. He leaned out into the hallway and found it annoyingly empty. He scowled but reluctantly settled himself against the doorframe and waited for someone to show up. For the next couple of minutes, that was where Tommy stayed, absently listening to the rustle of Tubbo's sheets as the other padawan did whatever the fuck one had to do to change an IV.

Finally, a nurse rounded the corner.

"Excuse me!" Tommy shouted. The nurse immediately turned to look at him. "Tubbo's awake, and he says he needs to change his IV!"

"Oh, of course!" the nurse called back cheerfully, and she started towards Tommy. "Please stand



out here, Padawan Tommy. I'll be done with Tubbo in just a moment.”

Tommy nodded stiffly and stepped aside, allowing the nurse into the room. She walked around Tubbo's bed, and the two began laughing over something. Tommy felt his shoulders relax. It was good to see Tubbo laugh.

A couple of moments later, Techno returned.

“Holy fucking Kantos,” Tommy hissed, once he noticed that Techno had somehow materialized at his side. “Don't fucking do that; I need to keep my blood pressure down. Did you get the books?”

Techno held out the stack, and Tommy took them with a grunt. “How's Tubbo?” the pig Jedi asked quietly. “Can you feel the echoes anymore?”

Worry hit Tommy's heart like an anvil. “You still think something wrong?” he demanded.

Techno sighed quietly. “I don't know.”

“What are you thinking, Technoblade?”

“It's nothing, Tommy.”

“No, you have ideas. What the fuck is going on?”

“*Nothing*, Tommy.”

The pig Jedi's steely tone brooked no argument. Tommy grumbled, but he let the subject go. If he really needed to know what Techno suspected, the pig Jedi would tell him. Again, the Jedi Master was a lot of things, but an idiot wasn't one of them.

Eventually, the nurse finished changing Tubbo's IV. She left with a cheerful wave, and Tommy found Tubbo much more awake and in a much better mood. Every trace of fear was gone from Tubbo's eyes. And, once Techno agreed to hang out with them for a little bit, the other padawan's smile grew even broader.

But as Tommy showed Tubbo the books he'd gotten and Techno talked about Philza's new prosthetic, Tommy knew something was still off. Techno's eyes never lost their edge. Something dark swirled around Tubbo's mind like a circling shark.

Tommy kept his smile big as he patted Tubbo's arm. He wouldn't let fucking anyone hurt his best friend again. *Ever*.

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“This is the Diamond District?” Clay asked incredulously. George shrugged, and Clay scoffed. “I was expecting, like, a couple of casinos and expensive street food. Not a literal uptown tourist spot.”

The Diamond District truly lived up to its name. Just from where he stood, Clay could see at least five gold-plated hotels and two extravagant fountains. People in ostentatious outfits wandered around with companions dangling on their arms, and vendors in fake jewelry shouted their wares. It felt like Clay was on the surface again, standing in the royals' district.

“This isn't where I expected to find Salem,” George muttered. The shorter man was clearly unhappy with being in such a luxurious and exorbitant environment. “Alright, he can't be too hard

to find. You said he's a recluse that occasionally speaks at events?"

Clay consulted his memories of one of Kabo's callers. The small Rodian had boasted of the "Great Scholar's knowledge and wisdom." Apparently, anyone who heard Kabo speak would walk away smarter. Clay thought it was a bunch of bullshit (and probably a scam, in some way), but the elite of the Underworld undoubtedly flocked to such a show. If nothing else, it was a way to pass the time.

"Yeah, and we caught him during one of his famous talks," Clay muttered. He adjusted his mask slightly, then gave George a dramatic bow. "Lead the way, 404."

George rolled his eyes. "Nightmare, there's like, six convention centers just within a 15-minute walk. Am I supposed to guess where he is?"

"I don't know. Maybe one of us will feel him when we get close."

The engineer snorted but took off into the crowds without another protest. Clay pulled his shoulders back, then strode after his best friend. Clay was glad to see that he still carried the "intimidating presence," even after being away from the Underworld for a couple of years. Admittedly, his scars probably had something to do with it.

But George... George was on a whole other level. The engineer's expression was borderline bored as he walked down the street. When a vendor started to lean towards him, George just whipped out his staff and sent an arc of sparks crackling across the uneven stones. The vendor immediately retreated to his booth. It was truly astounding, watching George in his element.

This was George's element, wasn't it? Clay could put up a decent front (like the previous day, when he'd spoken to Ejas), but George didn't pretend at all. He just *was*.

*Clay, you still with me?*

Clay snapped out of his thoughts, and he mentally slapped himself upon realizing that he'd spaced out for a good three blocks. *Yeah, I'm here*, he thought with no small amount of guilt. *What am I looking for?*

*The first convention center will be to our right, so try to scan it or something. There's no way Salem can just disappear off our radar.*

As they walked past the sprawling building, Clay did as George suggested and reached out his mind. The gargantuan convention center was packed to the brim with people, but none of them were strong with the Force. A couple might have amounted to something, should they have had proper training. But none glowed as brightly as a former Jedi Master should have.

"Nothing," Clay muttered. "I'll try the next one."

The next convention center, five minutes away, yielded the same results. A couple of unwitting Force-sensitives mingled with the rest of the hoards, but the power of a trained Jedi was notably absent.

For the next hour, Clay and George walked through the Diamond District to miserable results. Clay got a closer look at the elite of the Underworld than he'd ever wanted, and he was nearly assaulted a handful of times by people gripped by drunken thoughts of invincibility. But Kabo's exhibition was nowhere to be found. Despite being advertised on almost every corner, the event's actual location seemed to be the most closely guarded secret since the Oxxan Rubies.

(For just a moment, Clay wondered if he could get his hands on the Oxxan Rubies at some point during their trip. Then he remembered that he wasn't actually part of the black market, and he quickly put thoughts of theft out of his head.)

Finally, Clay collapsed on a rickety bench tucked outside of a boarded-up shop. “404, stop,” he called. “We need to be smarter about this. We're going to wander forever at this rate, and we don't have that kind of time.”

George joined Clay at the bench, arms crossed. “This is one of the fastest ways to search the Underworld,” the shorter man said archly. “We're far enough down that the callers aren't going to give up anything, even if we threaten them. Do you have any better ideas?”

Clay frowned. “I don't want to threaten anyone. There are enough drunks in these bars that we can probably pull information from one of them.”

For a second, something like guilt flashed over George's face. Then it was gone, and the engineer nodded. “We can do, yeah. Let's start here.”

“Here” was a bar across the street, dubbed “Solitude” by a big, blue neon sign. It towered at least three stories tall, with slivers of silver flecking the walls. Clay had never wanted to walk away from a place more in his life. But he'd been the one to recommend a different course of action, so he reluctantly got to his feet and trailed George to Solitude's entrance.

It was loud. As soon as Clay stepped over the threshold, he was bombarded with noise. He gently touched George's elbow, to which the engineer gave a slight nod, and stepped into the crowd.

The fumes in the air were suffocating. Between the smoke from a million different joints and the smell of alcohol carelessly splashed over the furniture, Clay felt like he was drowning. He'd barely been in the bar for a minute, and already, he wanted to leave.

*For the Temple*, Clay thought stubbornly. He pushed away his nausea and discontent and headed straight for the bar. A seat conveniently opened up for him as a man toppled off the stool with a loud hiccup.

“What'll you have?” the bartender asked, pale eyes flicking over Clay's face with a bored stare.

Clay smiled thinly. “Nothing. I'm waiting for a friend.”

The bartender cocked an eyebrow, and they pointed a slender finger at Clay's hair. “I'd ask what Nightmare is doing waiting for a friend in this place, but I don't think that'd be good for my health.”

“It wouldn't be.”

The bartender inclined their head slightly, then headed for the next patron. Clay exhaled softly. He wasn't used to being recognized. His first time around the Underworld, people had only known him by name. Clay supposed it was his fault that he was now recognizable since he'd chosen the bright red hair and crimson color theme as his trademark.

A headache was quickly developing. Clay pressed his fingers into his throbbing temples with a scowl. Gods, he wanted to leave. Level 3714 was so much more unbearable than 3716. Maybe it was the fake wealth being tossed around like petty cash or all the drunken revelry. Whatever it was, Clay wanted nothing more than to cut the whole place into pieces and leave its patrons sobbing into their drinks.

*What's stopping me?* Clay thought bitterly. *This place is already packed with criminals. No one*

*even looks at me twice.*

The whispers of two nearby aliens suddenly caught Clay's ear, breaking him out of his dark thoughts.

“Are the preparations made?” one of them chittered.

The other took a deep draft of their drink before responding. “Yeah. Kab's getting the stage ready, and Zam's almost done with the calls. In half an hour, we're going to be rich again.”

The first laughed shrilly. “Yeah, we are,” they said, their words broken up by hiccups. “We're gonna have so much fun. Think of all the gemstones we can buy!”

Clay slid from his stool and slipped over to the two conspirators' table. “Morning, gentlemen,” he said breezily, sinking into the open seat. “It's kind of early to be drunk, don't you think?”

One of the two aliens frowned at him. They were both ratlike in structure, and their noses were decorated with wiry whiskers. “Who are you?” they asked. They badly slurred their words, and Clay almost smiled. Oh, this was going to be easy. “We're waiting for Zam. That's her chair.”

“I'll be out of your hair in a minute,” Clay said soothingly, and he smiled slightly, even though the aliens couldn't see it. The smile would translate to his voice. “I just need to know where Kabo's show is today.”

The second rat scowled. “Get lost,” they snapped. “We don't give out information like that. You gotta pay.”

So that one still had some sense about him. Clay took a deep breath, then wove the Force into his voice. “It's okay,” he purred, and to the two aliens, he sounded like an angel. “I'm a friend of Kabo's. I just lost the chip that told me the location. You can tell a paying customer where it is, right?”

The two rats looked at each other for a moment. Both of them broke out in dumb smiles.

“Oh, if you're a friend of Kabo's, that's fine!” the first rat laughed. “He's a street down in the Cadór Center. You can't miss him!”

Clay gave the two rats a pleasant smile. “Thank you. Have a great day.”

With that, Clay stood and left the two aliens to their fun. He power-walked towards the entrance, determined to get out of Solitude as quickly as possible. *I've got the location*, he thought, projecting it to George. *Let's go*. Clay stepped out onto the street, and the oppressive haze in his head cleared. He sighed, relieved, and sank against Solitude's wall.

There was something about places like that that Clay couldn't handle. It always felt like he wouldn't make it out alive.

“Nightmare? What's wrong?”

Clay cracked his eyes open. George stood in front of him, a worried frown creasing his face. The smell of the bar still hung on the shorter man like the stench of a dead animal. Yet... George didn't seem affected in the slightest.

*I don't belong here. I never have.*

Clay tried for a smile, but he wasn't entirely sure if it worked or not. "Just got a headache," he said lightly. "It's nothing. Listen, Kabo is in the Cadór Center down the street. It sounds like his show is going to start soon."

Excitement filled the engineer's eyes. "Perfect. We're almost done here."

Somehow, Clay thought that they were the farthest thing from "done." But he hauled himself back to his feet regardless. As Clay walked away from Solitude, he could have sworn that the building whispered to him.

*Come back, Clay. You want to stay, don't you? There's so much for you here. So much! Our patrons **never want to leave**.*

A sharp shiver cut down Clay's spine. He picked up the pace a little, almost pressing against George as they walked.

Clay had always had an extreme sensitivity to the Force, even as a youngling. He was sure that *something* terrible had happened in that bar. Maybe that explained the pounding headaches that randomly popped up as he traveled through the Underworld.

Within a couple of minutes, Clay and George arrived at the Cadór Center. It was packed with people, so the two of them had to slow their pace once they got inside. However, navigation wasn't a problem. Huge projectors declaring "Kabo is here!" decorated every wall, and more callers stood at every corner, shouting Kabo's virtues.

"This doesn't feel right," George muttered as they shuffled past a group of laughing people. "I thought you said Kabo was a recluse when he isn't speaking."

Clay had the same misgivings. As he looked around, he saw nothing but the pomp and circumstance of everything else in the Diamond District. "He is," Clay murmured back. "Keep your eyes open."

George nodded slightly.

The two of them were pushed along by the crowd, and eventually, they were dumped into a gigantic auditorium. Clay immediately slunk to the side of the doorway, hiding in the shadows of a towering statue. George slipped to his side a moment later.

"How many people do you think this is?" the shorter man asked quietly. "It's gotta be in the thousands."

Clay looked over the seething mass of people. "Yeah, it's a lot."

For a couple of minutes, Clay kept his eyes roving. Then, with an ominous boom, the main doors slammed shut. The crowd gave a collective gasp. But, as Clay noted, the gasp seemed more expectant than worried. *This is a show*, Clay realized suddenly. *The people here don't want knowledge. They're expecting a show.*

The lights in the auditorium dimmed to nothing. At the same time, huge spotlights roared to life on the ceiling, and a king's fanfare blasted from hidden speakers. As a final touch, smoke poured across the stage.

Clay rested a hand on one of his dual swords.

A panel in the stage slid back. Slowly, with the air of a lifelong showman, a tall figure rose out of

the smoke to thunderous cheers.

As soon as Clay saw the alien on the stage, he knew with absolute certainty that it wasn't Kan Bo Salem.

"This is wrong," George murmured a moment later. "I thought he was human."

"He is," Clay muttered back. The alien on the stage (maybe a Frenk?) began throwing his hands around and leaping across the stage. "Besides, this guy doesn't have a single connection to the Force in him."

"But why's he using Kabo's name? Kan Bo Salem didn't sound like the kind of man who would take kindly to someone else profiting off of his reputation."

Clay scanned the area around the stage. Both sides of the massive dais were blocked off by statues of creatures Clay now realized was supposed to be "Kabo." But, to the right of the right-side statue, a small door was carved into the wall. Clay grinned. "How about we see if we can find something ourselves?"

Clay slunk along the wall towards the door. Between the darkness of the auditorium and the shadows cast by the many motifs on the walls, Clay was virtually hidden from sight. Within moments, he stood in front of the door. The little panel moved with only a tap of his foot.

Clay ducked into the passageway beyond the panel. A moment later, George followed.

"You couldn't have given me more warning?" the engineer grumbled once Clay had replaced the panel. "I thought we were going to watch for a bit."

Guilt touched Clay's heart, and he winced. "Sorry. I thought it'd be better if I moved before someone noticed us hanging around."

George gave him a strange look. It was somewhere between surprise and confusion, and it made Clay's stomach ripple in an awful way. "It's okay," George said slowly. "I mean, you're not wrong. So, props to you, I guess."

The two of them stood in awkward silence for a moment. Then George said, "Might as well go see what we got ourselves into," and started off down the narrow hallway. Clay followed the shorter man wordlessly.

The hallway was a drastic change to the rest of the convention center. It was made of wood and poorly cut stones, and from somewhere nearby, Clay heard the drip of water. It felt like they'd teleported to an entirely different planet. Even the air had lost its pricey tang.

Their steady pace was abruptly interrupted when George came to a grinding stop. Clay, distracted by the odd current of power in the air, didn't notice in time and ran directly into the engineer's back.

"Holy shit!" George hissed, scrambling backward. "Be careful!"

Clay scowled, though he grabbed George's arm and dragged the shorter man back a couple of steps. "Gods, sorry that I didn't pay attention for, like, two seconds."

"No, idiot. *Look.*"

Clay peered over George's shoulder. With a sick thud, his stomach dropped out. The hallway disappeared into a gaping pit. From what Clay had seen, there were no other branches, no secret

passageways, and no doors. *This* was where the hallway led.

“Oh, gods,” Clay muttered. “Sorry.”

George gave him a faint smile. “It's fine. I'm not dead yet.”

For some reason, that simple exchange broke through the tension that had settled over them. Clay grinned, and George's smile widened.

“We're both so stupid,” Clay chuckled, and he gently squeezed George's hand. “We're still doing the same dumb, reckless shit that we did when we were padawans.”

“Yeah.” George squeezed his hand back. “But at least we're still in it together.”

Carefully, the two of them shuffled to the edge of the pit. It dissolved into complete darkness, without so much as a single flicker of light to indicate the bottom. After a moment of searching, Clay found a small stone lying nearby, and he nudged it into the pit. There was a good five seconds of silence before it landed.

“Do we go down there?” George asked quietly. The engineer's face looked paler than usual.

Clay stared into the darkness. Logically, he knew that he should be terrified of unfathomable depths and unknown terrors. But the truth was that Solitude scared him more than this pit did.

“We have to,” Clay said after a moment. “Hold still.”

“Wha-”

Before the engineer could protest (which Clay knew he would, given the chance), Clay scooped George into his arms and threw them into the pit. George let out a strangled noise, but he quickly buried it in Clay's shoulder. Despite the grave situation, Clay cracked a smile. Even in the face of danger, George knew better than to give their presence away with a scream. No wonder the shorter man had made it in the Underworld.

They landed with barely a sound. All around them, the darkness was broken with torches burning with faint, teal fire. After confirming that they weren't in imminent danger, Clay gently let George out of his arms.

“*Clay*,” the engineer growled. George's hand shot out and grabbed a fistful of Clay's cloak, dragging them together. “If you ever do that again, I will fucking kill you.”

George's dark eyes glinted in the dim light, and his cheeks were flushed with the aftereffects of fear. Maybe it was the fact that he'd playing Nightmare or some other fucked up psychosis that his brain was using to distract from his fear. But in the face of George's anger, Clay could only grin. “You know you loved it,” he said lightly. “You always have.”

George tossed Clay away with a disgusted snort, but a grin tugged at the corners of the shorter man's mouth. Clay barely contained a laugh. His mirth quickly died once he remembered that he and George were stuck in a pit without a single point of direction.

“Where to now?” George asked as if he'd read Clay's mind. “I can barely see a thing.”

Clay walked to the edge of the tunnel and looked around. Beyond the tunnel, three more led off into the darkness, all of them illuminated by the same faint, teal torches. “It looks like some kind of maze,” he announced for George's benefit. “Maybe this is what level 3714 looked like before

reconstruction. Like, before it was the Diamond District.”

The two of them stared into the darkness for a long, long moment. Then, at the very edge of his sensitivity, Clay felt a presence. It was steady as any of the Jedi back in the Temple.

Salem.

“Follow me,” Clay whispered. “I think the real Kabo is down here.”

Clay started into the center hallway. He turned off his conscious mind and let the Force guide him through the labyrinth of tunnels. Even though Clay tried to create a map in his head, all the turns and repetitive bricks destroyed his sense of direction. The only reason he knew they weren't going in circles was that Kan Bo Salem's Force signature got closer and closer.

Finally, Clay stepped out of a tunnel and found himself standing in a giant cavern.

The cavern towered three stories above their heads, and the walls were hewn from rough stone. Luminescent teal plants were scattered around the cavern, providing the illusion of colorful sunlight. In front of them, a small lake bubbled quietly, with streams slipping through drains on both sides of the cavern. In the middle of the lake sat an island, and on the island was a compact, wooden hutch.

“If ever there was a place to be a recluse,” George murmured. “I never would have found this place without you.”

Clay could only nod dumbly. He'd never imagined that such an ethereal and beautiful place could exist in the Underworld, let alone be buried beneath such a materialistic level.

“So you did make it.”

Clay flinched, startled, and frantically searched for the source of the voice. Then he picked out a man walking towards them from the hutch.

“I thought that you'd get lost,” the man continued conversationally as he approached them. “Everyone does.”

The man stopped about ten feet away from them, and he looked between Clay and George passively.

Clay swallowed and asked, “Salem?”

The man's mouth twitched in a smile. “You already know the answer to that.”

Clay wasn't exactly sure what he'd been expecting, especially after his conversation with Eret. He'd known that the former Jedi Master was just a man, but still... Kan Bo Salem looked like a regular person. He had long, black hair streaked with white, tied back in a low ponytail, and a neat goatee. His light brown skin was absent of scars, and his ocean blue eyes showed no signs of dementia or insanity. Even his clothes were simple and plain, but clean. He was just... a man.

With a flash of guilt, Clay realized that George was just a man, too. Yet, when thinking of both exiled Jedi, he'd expected them to look more monstrous. What did that say about him?

“You must desperately need something if you've sought me out,” Salem said evenly. “Who am I speaking to?”



“Clay,” Clay said. “This is...”

That wasn't his place. Clay trailed off, and he glanced to George. For a moment, George was quiet. Then the shorter man heaved a silent sigh and said, “George. My name is George.”

The corners of Salem's mouth twitched again. “It's a pleasure to meet you. Why don't you come inside, and we can talk about what's brought you all the way down here.”

The man turned and headed back towards the small house on the island.

*Are we trusting him not to kill us?* Clay thought nervously.

*We've come all this way. We don't have a choice.*

George headed after Salem. Clay took a shaky breath, then followed the two other men. Now that it actually came down to talking to Salem, Eret's warnings ran through his head.

*“There is a reason that his interest in Sith values got him exiled. He isn't a stable man. If, by some miracle, you manage to find him, he could be completely out of his mind. Do you want to risk that?”*

At the time, Clay had been so excited to finally get a lead that could expose the traitor in the Temple. Now... he just wondered if his unchecked arrogance had placed him and George in mortal danger.

He had the thought far too late. Clay's very first thought should have been for his and George's safety.

Gods. He hadn't learned anything since his last trip into the Underworld, had he?

Salem led them over a sturdy wooden bridge and into the small hutch. The house was cozy, with a small living room packed with trinkets and tokens, a rudimentary kitchen, and a door that probably led to an office or a bedroom. Salem waved for Clay and George to sit down on one of the couches, and they did so, albeit hesitantly. Clay was still nervous, and, judging by the tension in his jaw, so was George.

“So,” Salem said, lowering himself onto the other couch. “What has brought you into the catacombs of level 3714?”

George said nothing, and Clay realized that he'd been dictated as their spokesperson. “We're here seeking information,” he said slowly, carefully.

Salem's eyes crinkled. “You could have stayed for the show upstairs.”

Clay scoffed lightly. “That's a performance meant to collect money from the pockets of the intoxicated rich. I'd bet you have some sort of deal with the pretenders running the show.” Salem shrugged, and Clay quickly took their conversation to the point. “We want to ask you about the Force.”

The cheerful light in Salem's eyes dimmed. “So you're Jedi,” he said. His voice had also lost its jovial tone.

“I'm not,” George muttered. “I was exiled four years ago when I was a padawan. I'm only here because I know my way around the Underworld.”

Salem looked to Clay expectantly.

“I am a Jedi,” Clay said weakly. Never before had he wished to be anything but a Jedi so badly. “I’m a Master with a padawan. But, uh... I don’t think I’m experienced enough to have one.”

“Neither of you is experienced enough for your walks of life,” Salem noted archly. “And you’re definitely too young to be down here with an insane old man. Why’d you come to me to learn about the Force? The Temple is still standing, isn’t it?”

*The Temple might not be standing for much longer.*

Clay slipped his hand into his pocket and pulled out the small holocom he’d received from Eret. Salem’s piercing eyes narrowed at the sight of it. “We’re here because Eret recommended you,” Clay said quietly. Salem’s Force presence exploded, and Clay steeled himself against the dizzying power flowing off of the older man. “This is from him. I don’t know what’s on it, but he asked me to give it to you.”

Salem snatched the holocom from Clay’s outstretched palm. He swept into the other room, slamming the door shut behind him. As soon as the former Jedi Master left, the pressure squeezing Clay’s head finally dissipated.

“Gods, this guy is strong,” Clay mumbled. “He could kill us with just a finger.”

“I’ll pay you to never speak again,” George hissed back. Despite the venom in his voice, his leg pressed against Clay’s, and his hands trembled with visible nerves. Clay had the strange urge to grab George’s hand, but he resisted. Barely.

For several long, long minutes, Clay and George sat alone in the living room. The rest of the house was dead silent.

Then the door opened once again.

Salem entered the room, his hands buried in his pockets. As he took his seat on the other couch, his dark eyes looked strangely cloudy. Clay repressed a frown. Had Eret’s message been that moving?

“I know you’re probably tired of being the middle man,” Salem said quietly. He held out his hand, revealing a different, small holocom sitting on his palm. “But it would mean a great deal to me if you give this to A- Eret. I will never return to the surface, and he will never come down here.”

In all the time that Clay had known Eret, the other Jedi Master had only asked a favor of him once: giving the holocom to Salem if they found him. He took the holocom from Salem’s hand. “I will,” he promised. “Is that a hint for us to leave?”

Salem smiled tiredly, crinkling red-rimmed eyes. “No, not yet. For bringing that message to me, I will try to answer whatever question you came to ask. What do you want to know about the Force?”

Clay breathed a silent sigh of relief before speaking again. “Is there a way to completely hide your Force presence? Like, a form of shielding so advanced that no one can sense you? Not even an experienced Jedi Master?”

Salem rubbed his chin. “Is Philza still alive?” he asked. Clay nodded, and Salem grunted. “Then you do still have a Jedi Master at the Temple. There is no technique I know of that could hide someone from Philza’s mind. Even the primary shielding that we are taught as padawans takes years to learn, yes? You would have to be naturally gifted in a way that surpasses everything I’ve

ever heard of or read about.

“A more efficient method of 'hiding' would be to master the art of mental disorientation. Throwing out emotions and feelings while maintaining strong mental shields achieves the same effect. Even better, whoever you are hiding from wouldn't know that you are the one creating the distraction, so long as you keep the feelings you shed anonymous. Is that the answer you're looking for?”

It wasn't at all. If someone in the Temple had learned of Kan Bo Salem's “disorientation” method, then they wouldn't even have to be particularly strong with Force to hide. Their suspect could be anybody.

“It's not ideal,” Clay admitted, and Salem grimaced. “But thank you for the knowledge. I might use that technique someday.”

The three of them fell quiet. Just as Clay was about to stand and thank Salem for his time, George spoke up.

“One more question, if you'll let me ask it,” the engineer said slowly. Salem inclined his head. “We have a lead on a spy that grieved some of our friends. They were last seen on level 1509 until a couple of days ago when they showed up on 2087. Supposedly, they run for some secret Underworld gang. You ever heard of them?”

Salem gave them a wry smile. “Yes, I have. You're thinking of the Night Thief. He's a human blessed with the twin gifts of idiocy and cunning. I've never had the misfortune of meeting him personally, but he's gods-damned fast. One of the best spies in the Underworld. Whether or not he runs for a secret gang, I couldn't tell you. But you're in luck. He just pulled a job on 2087, and he's staying there for a couple of days to spend his cash.”

“How the hell do you know all that if you live in here?” Clay asked, half-joking, half-serious.

“I don't spend all my time here,” Salem chuckled. “I just don't announce to the entire Underworld when I leave or return. Anyways, the man you're looking for is the Night Thief. You'll find him on level 2087 for the next three days, and then he'll disappear until his next job.”

Clay glanced at George. *Is that all we need to know?*

*Gods, yes. This is so much better than the info we'd get from the local idiots.*

“Thank you for your time, Master Salem,” Clay said, getting to his feet. “And thank you for your hospitality. Would you be kind enough to tell us how to get out of here?”

Salem chuckled and rose to his feet as well. “You have some nerve to call me 'Master Salem,’” the older man said, still laughing quietly. “But it's nice to hear it again. Turn right at the entrance to the cavern and head all the way down the tunnel. At the very end, you'll find a large drainage pipe that dumps you into level 3710. From there, you may return to wherever it is you're staying.”

Clay and George made their way out of Salem's house, followed by the former Jedi Master himself. They made it all the way back over to the aforementioned tunnel before Salem spoke again.

“Wait.”

Salem stood a couple of feet away, hands clasped in his sleeves. Now that Clay was really looking, he realized that Salem's cloak looked just like Jedi robes.

“I understand that this is a difficult place to get to,” Salem began quietly. “But... should you ever

need assistance, please do not hesitate to come and find me. It's nicer than I had thought it would be to have the company of my kin again.”

Clay smiled. “You're always welcome at the Temple, Master.”

Salem snorted, and he turned back to his house. “What a fantastical thought, Master Dream. Have a safe trip. I hope you find what you came down here for.”

With that, Salem disappeared back into his cavern. Clay's heart backflipped in his chest, but he managed to shuffle himself into the tunnel and start the long journey out of the catacombs. George walked wordlessly beside him.

After several minutes of silence, the engineer spoke.

“How'd he know your name?”

Clay shrugged helplessly. “He's Kan Bo Salem?”

George laughed, but it was weak. They were both shaken from their experience with the exiled Jedi Master.

It took a couple more minutes before George spoke again.

“He wasn't what I expected,” the shorter man said quietly. “Especially that whole bit about us being his kin. I was never a Knight, he got exiled, and you're basically a Jedi legend. What the hell do we have in common?”

Clay thought of Eret and how the Jedi Master had overcome his blindness with a traditionally Sith art. He thought of Philza and Techno, partners closer than brothers, and Wilbur and Tommy, the strangest Master and Padawan duo ever seen by the Order. He thought of Sapnap, Tubbo, Bad, Antfrost, even Skeppy. All of his friends were so strange and so far beyond what Jedi were supposed to look like. And yet...

“We all know the Force,” Clay said eventually. “You don't become a Jedi because the Council taps you on the head and says so. If they didn't exist... I probably wouldn't be a Jedi. And you would be.”

George gave him an unreadable look. “You think?”

Clay swallowed the ball of emotion that had suddenly lodged itself in his throat. “I mean, I dunno. My point is that we're all Force-sensitive. That's all that matters. Come on. I want to get out of here.”

---

Techno crossed his arms as Phil experimentally rolled his shoulder, flexing his fingers and making a fist. “You shouldn't even be sitting up,” Techno muttered. “You're going to tear the stitches.”

Phil shot him a brilliant smile that almost melted Techno's irritation. “Aw, Techno. You don't have to worry about me so much, I'm fine. I'm just trying to get used to this.”

“This” was Phil's new durasteel arm. Its finish was a shiny bronze, and golden cables ran between the exoskeleton like miniature snakes. It wasn't ugly, exactly, but it made Techno's skin crawl. There was no life to it. It didn't look anything like the rest of Phil.

“Yeah, I like it!” Phil chirped suddenly, and Techno plastered a smile across his face. “It’s nice! They did a great job with the interface, too; it feels like I’m using my own arm. The touch sensitivity is a little scuffed, but the doctors said they’re still making some small adjustments. I’d be fine with it like this, to be honest with you.”

“Like this.” “Like this” was a cold piece of technology that Phil would have to live with for the rest of his life.

“It doesn’t look bad or anything,” Techno said carefully. “Are they going to leave to it all exposed like that? It seems really stupid to leave all those important wires just hanging out.”

“Uh...” Phil flexed his fingers again, and the wires in his forearm stretched in response. “I know they won’t cover it up until they’re done with the fixes,” the other man said slowly. “And once they’re done, they’ll make it look cleaner and stuff. But, yeah, this is about it.”

*I hate it. I hate all of it.*

“It’s... cool.”

Phil’s mouth curved in a slight frown, and disappointment shone through their bond. Ever since Phil had woken up, their bond had been more resonant than usual. They’d been strongly connected before the accident, but now, Techno felt Phil’s emotions on a level that he’d never even fathomed before.

“Techno... you don’t have to pretend,” Phil said gently. “I know you don’t like this. I know you think it’s ugly. I mean, shit, I’d take my arm back in a heartbeat. But this is what I’ve got. I have to learn to like it.”

Techno sighed. He sank onto the edge of Phil’s bed, suddenly exhausted, and his partner’s real hand rested on his shoulder. “I know,” Techno muttered. “I just... I don’t like it. You already know that.”

Both sides of their bond flooded with weariness. They were both exhausted.

“I know,” Phil murmured. “Me too.”

Within a couple of minutes, Phil returned to his chipper self. He flexed his arm and talked about everything it could do while Techno listened patiently and nodded at the appropriate moments. For Phil, Techno would keep his worries and complaints to himself. For Phil, Techno would do anything he could to be supportive.

Until the other Jedi Master came up with the most stupid idea that Techno had ever heard.

“I’m not going to duel you,” Techno said flatly. Phil’s bottom lip jutted out in a pout, and Techno let out an incredulous laugh. “Phil, you just got out of surgery. You need to rest for a least a day.”

Phil heaved a dramatic sigh and flopped back against his bed. “Come on, Techno,” he said, with just the barest hint of a whine. “I want to see how well I can fight with this.”

“You’re right-handed!” Techno spluttered. “A mechanical arm doesn’t change that!”

“Master Technoblade?”

Techno turned, grateful for the chance to ignore Phil’s indignant protests, and faced the nurse standing at the door. “What is it?” he asked.

The nurse glanced nervously beyond the doorframe. "There's a visitor for Master Philza," he said, in a much more quiet tone than most of the nurses that entered the ward. "But, uh... I thought you'd want to speak to her instead."

Techno frowned. *Her?*

"Do you want to let her in?"

Techno glanced back at Phil. The other man's expression was calm, but worry and uncertainty drifted through their bond. Techno gently squeezed his partner's metal shoulder. "I'll take care of it," he said quietly. "Be right back."

Techno followed the nurse and stepped into the hallway, carefully closing the door behind him. Immediately, his eyes landed on the woman standing a few feet away. Wavy, blue hair rippled over her shoulders, and she stood peacefully to the side. But Techno felt the turmoil that roared beneath the woman's calm front.

"You can leave," Techno muttered to the nurse. Relief crossed the nurse's face, and he nodded his thanks before taking off in the opposite direction. Once he was sure that the nurse was gone, Techno took a deep breath. "Master Delphina. What can I do for you?"

Delphina turned. A faux worried frown was plastered on her face, and Techno almost retched at the expression.

"Oh, Technoblade!" Delphina called, hurrying up to him. Techno took an instinctive step away as she approached him. "I didn't think you'd be here. I thought you were working with the task force on Eret's case."

*That's where you should be* laced Delphina's words.

Techno smiled thinly. "I took leave, actually. Rhodys authorized it."

A dangerous glint flashed through Delphina's eyes. "Did they? They didn't ask the Council about it. Regardless, what on earth could you have taken leave for, Technoblade? Haven't you recovered from your experience in the Underworld?"

It took everything he had to keep a smile on his face. "I have recovered," Techno said slowly, trying to keep the distaste from his voice. "I'm taking care of Philza."

"You're taking care of him?" Delphina repeated archly. "Technoblade, he's a temporary associate. You do remember the assignment that you two filed for originally?"

Techno did. To circumvent the Order's rules about attachment, Phil had presented their partnership as a "temporary alliance." It was odd phrasing, to be sure, but it had slipped past the Council's eyes and gotten approved. They're never specified how long they intended to be "temporarily aligned" or how closely they planned to work together.

"Yeah. He's my partner." Delphina's eyes flashed, and Techno almost smiled. "He just went through surgery, Delphina. I think it's best if you come back later."

Delphina clasped her hands together, and for a split second, Techno thought that she'd concealed a blade between her fingers and was about to stab him.

"All due respect, Technoblade," Delphina said in a sickly sweet voice. "But I need to speak to Master Philza *now*. I just had a very distressing interaction with Knight Sapnap and Master Eret,

and I wish to speak to him about it.”

Techno cracked a genuine smile. “I’ll tell him all about it. He can get back to you later.”

Delphina stared at him for a moment. Finally, she scoffed. “This is highly irregular, but... very well. I was walking through the Temple when I noticed Knight Sapnap following me. His mind was full of ill intentions. When I tried to ask him what he thought he was doing, he got extremely defensive. Then Master Eret interrupted us, and he acted as if *I’d done* something wrong.”

Either Delphina was the most cunning person Techno had ever met, and he couldn’t figure her angle, or she was dumb enough to think that Phil would take her side in this argument.

“I’ll tell him,” Techno repeated, just barely remembering to take the edge off his words before he spoke. “Is there anything else I can do for you?”

Something unstable entered Delphina’s wide eyes, and Techno instinctively tensed.

“Actually, there is something you can do,” Delphina hissed, crowding closer to Techno and forcing him against the wall. “You can get the *fuck* away from Philza and go back to the task force. A reject like you doesn’t even deserve to remain in the Order, let alone be Philza’s so-called ‘partner.’ You are going to corrupt him, and may the gods hear my promise, Technoblade: I will not let you turn him to your side. I will see him *dead* before that happens.”

Techno’s self-control snapped. He shoved Delphina away from him with rigid fingers, then pulled his lightsaber from his belt, digging it into the other Jedi Master’s stomach. Due to the long folds of his sleeves, Techno’s unspoken threat was hidden.

“Listen to me,” Techno snarled. “I don’t know how you fooled the Council. If you were put to the same standard that you enforce for everyone else, you’d have been exiled a long time ago. But we both know that you’re not gonna last much longer. You’re already cracking.”

Delphina’s lips lifted in a sneer.

“One more thing.” Techno drove his lightsaber as far into her gut as it would go, and Delphina winced in pain. “Don’t *ever* threaten Phil again. I will go to hell and back to keep him safe. If you touch him, I promise you, you will never sleep easy. I will *always* be there.”

For a long, long moment, Delphina didn’t move. Then, ever so slowly, her trademark sickly sweet smile spread over her face. “Thank you for relaying my message, Master Technoblade,” she hissed. “I expect a call from Philza at a later date.”

Delphina slapped Techno’s lightsaber away, then strode off down the hallway. Techno watched her with anger roaring in his ears. It took several minutes for his breathing to return to normal, even once the Jedi Master had disappeared around the corner. Finally, Techno took a shuddering breath and shoved his lightsaber back into his belt.

Something was terribly wrong with Delphina. Techno didn’t yet know how he’d prove it... but he would. If she was willing to pretend that Eret was a Sith because he was blind, then there had to be something in her past that painted her the same way.

But that was for another time. Phil was waiting.

As soon as Techno entered the ward, his partner looked up. “That was something,” Phil called. “Is she gone?”

Techno nodded. "How much did you hear?"

"Bits and pieces. Enough."

"I'll fill you in later. I think we'll have to call Eret and Sapnap and get the whole story, too. But, listen..." Techno crossed the room and sank onto Phil's bed again, earning a worried look from the other man. "How much do you know about Delphina? I know that Dream said her files were clean, but... she can't be normal. Outside, she just threatened to kill you. That's not a Jedi thing to do."

Admittedly, Techno had done the same thing. But he barely floated the line of Jedi, and he wasn't on the Council.

Phil frowned, and a mix of protectiveness and anger filled their bond. "I don't know much," he admitted. "Probably as much as they know about me, to be honest. I know she's been off lately, but I didn't think she was that far gone. Are you okay?"

Techno waved a dismissive hand. His mind was already flying back through his memories, trying to recall his first interaction with Delphina. Had something been wrong with her then, too? "No, no, I'm fine." A memory unrelated to Delphina suddenly popped into Techno's head, and he looked around for his holopad. "Oh, I was supposed to call Wilbur. He wanted to ask me something."

"Why didn't he just call you?" Phil asked, understandably confused.

"Tommy forgot the question that Wilbur wanted him to ask," Techno muttered. Where was his holopad?

"Tommy was here?"

"For a while, yeah. I'll tell you later."

Finally, Techno found his holopad buried in one of his pockets. He huffed, annoyed at the effort he'd had to expend, then sent a call out to Wilbur. The other man's smiling face appeared on the screen within the first two rings.

"*Techno!*" Wilbur called cheerfully. "*It's good to see you!*"

"You're here with Phil, too," Techno said, and he propped up his holopad so Wilbur could see both him and Phil. The matching smiles on Wilbur's and Phil's faces at seeing each other almost made Techno give a smile of his own.

"*Oh my gods, Phil, your arm!*" Wilbur was basically glowing with delight. "*That looks so fucking cool!*"

Phil laughed and flexed said mechanical arm. "Thank you, Will. Techno doesn't like it, but-"

"It's not that I don't like its design," Techno muttered. "The design is fine. That's not my issue with it." Both Wilbur and Phil laughed, and this time, Techno allowed himself a small smile.

"Anyways. Tommy said you had a question for me?"

Wilbur heaved a long-suffering sigh. "*Gods, did he forget? Fucking idiot. Well, don't worry, it wasn't anything time-sensitive. I was just going to ask how Tubbo's doing. I know Sapnap's keeping an eye on him, but I'd appreciate it if you pop into his room every so often, just to see how he is. I'm worried about the kid.*"

At the mention of Tubbo, Techno's heart sank. Before he could even voice his worrying experience



with the padawan, Phil gave him a concerned look.

*What is it?*

"I guess I can tell both of you at the same time," Techno mumbled. "I, uh... I think something's wrong with Tubbo."

Wilbur frowned. "*Tubbo?*" he repeated, speaking for both him and Phil. "*Why?*"

Techno pressed his hands into his eyes. "Either he's having crazy nightmares or something is tainting his Force presence. I don't know, maybe it's just nightmares. But he..." Techno trailed off as he recalled the padawan's terror. It had been so, *so* vivid. "Tommy and I visited him today. When we got there, gods, you would think he was dying. And there was some kind of echo in the air. I don't know what happened, but it didn't feel normal. Any ideas?"

Phil and Wilbur were both quiet, clearly processing Techno's miniature speech. Finally, Phil looked up. "Is Sapnap going to be here every day?" he asked quietly. Techno nodded. "Okay. Well, at least with me, Techno, and Sapnap here, nothing should slip past us. Will, you and Tommy are visiting pretty frequently too, right?"

"*Yeah,*" Wilbur said. The other man looked exhausted. "*Gods, poor Tubbo... can't we ever get a fucking break? Just a week or two, that's all I'm asking.*"

Techno smiled wanly. "We'll sleep when we're dead, Wilbur. Call me if you think of anything."

"*Yeah, I will. I'll see you guys.*"

Wilbur's face disappeared from Techno's holopad. Techno heaved a sigh, and Phil leaned back, resting against his pillows with tired eyes. For a long moment, the two of them sat there in silence. Techno wasn't sure where his emotions ended, and Phil's began.

Phil suddenly hissed, breaking the silence and pressing a hand to his right wrist. "Damn it," he spat. "It's back. Gods, I don't know what it is. It's just this stinging feeling that comes and goes like fucking water."

Techno almost reached for the patch of cotton hidden beneath his left sleeve but repressed the urge. "It's probably nothing. I can get a nurse if you want."

"No, no, it's fine," Phil muttered. "It's already gone. I'm really tired, though."

"Then go to sleep," Techno drawled. "I swear, Phil, I'm supposed to be the one that's complaining about being tired. Just take a nap."

Phil rolled his eyes, but his lips curved in a gentle smile. "Okay, okay, I will. Thank you, Techno. For sticking around and everything."

"Don't mention it. What else would I do, just leave you in here by yourself?"

Phil settled himself against his pillow, and within minutes, he was fast asleep. Their bond glowed gently, and Techno smiled to himself. Phil's presence in the back of his mind was as necessary as any limb. He wasn't sure how he'd survived a week without it.

Techno ran gentle fingers over Phil's mechanical arm. It was ugly, yes. But it was infinitely better than not having Phil around at all.

*You'll be fine*, Techno thought fondly. Delphina's manic smile appeared in his head. Techno tightened his grasp on Phil's metal fingers. *I'll make sure of it.*

## Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading! If you're so inclined, so please leave a comment and let me know what you thought! I always enjoy hearing from y'all <3

All the words from this update came from Dream and George's segment, not gonna lie lol. But I didn't have the heart to cut it down (plus, I was far too proud of it), so y'all got stuck with a 11.5k chapter. You're welcome???

The next update will be the finale of this arc, and it is coming next Friday (8th)! Have a great week! And for those y'all going back to school/work, I wish you the best of luck!

## Depths of the Earth, Part 4

### Chapter Notes

Hello, everyone! I have a bit of a confession to make... due to creativity and motivational issues, I just couldn't get into a "finale" mood this week. However, I still had character development and build-up that I desperately wanted to write, so I decided to split this arc into five parts! This week is "filler," if you will. Next week will be the true finale!

(I'm so sorry for the sudden change hhhh. But, somehow, this "filler" still ended up being 10k??? Pog???)

I also apologize for releasing this update so late! Luckily, I don't think many of you live in my timezone, so hopefully, you're reading this at a reasonable time lol.

One last thing: trigger warning for serious discussions of death, a minorly graphic description of injury, and extreme emotional distress. Always read at your own safety!

Alright, enough of my rambling! Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Wilbur rechecked his wrist communicator for the third time in as many seconds. He'd left Tubbo's room almost 15 minutes ago. How long did it take Tommy to say goodbye? *They're probably scheming*, Wilbur thought dryly, and he went back to thumbing through the book he'd borrowed from the infirmary's lobby.

After another five minutes, Wilbur snapped the book shut and strode back into the infirmary.

The tang of disinfectant pricked at Wilbur's nose, and he scowled, hurrying through the busy main lobby. Wilbur didn't like the infirmary. Of the many times that he'd been hurt, he'd gone to the infirmary only once. Even then, it had been at Tommy's insistence. Something about the pain that drifted in the air made Wilbur feel... unsettled.

No matter. The air was blessedly pain-free.

People flooded the hallway. For “no one was hurt during the Temple Sieges,” there was a considerable amount of people in the rooms. Somewhere to Wilbur's right, a group of nurses burst out laughing, and Wilbur barely kept from turning a glare on them. With Tubbo still bedridden, he couldn't lose his edge. Tommy could be next. Anyone could be next.

With a deep sigh, Wilbur shook himself out of his depressing thoughts. A lingering cloud of despair had been hanging over his head for weeks, and he had to get rid of it. Everyone was still alive.

So far.

Wilbur set his jaw and walked faster.

About halfway back to Tubbo's room, something tugged at the back of Wilbur's mind. He ignored

it, as Tommy usually sent him emotions without even realizing it. Then more emotions flooded in. Anger, worry, fear, and nervousness swirled around like a nightmarish melting pot, and Wilbur clutching at his chest. Gods, he could barely breathe. Tommy was *really* projecting loudly.

*Tubbo, I'm so sorry. Gods, Tubbo, I want to help you...*

Wilbur froze. That was way too specific to be a projection. He was listening to Tommy's thoughts. He picked up his feet and raced down the hallway, dodging around nurses and patients alike with only muttered "sorry"s. Tommy's Force presence pulsed in his mind, louder than usual.

What had happened now? What else had fate decided to burden them with?

Wilbur flew around a corner and very nearly crashed into Tommy. "Whoa, I'm here," he said. Wilbur grabbed Tommy's shoulders to keep his padawan from panicking. "It's me. What's going on?"

Tommy took a shuddering breath, and Wilbur realized that his padawan's eyes were red-rimmed and teary. "It's nothing," Tommy mumbled. Wilbur frowned, but Tommy cut over him. "No, seriously, it's nothing. It just... it happened again. He was drifting off, and I felt his dreams, and I... I couldn't..." Tommy sniffled, then immediately looked disgusted with himself. "I'm ready to go. Can we leave now?"

Without waiting for a response, Tommy pushed past Wilbur and began walking down the hallway. Wilbur watched Tommy for a couple of seconds before he followed.

Tommy's mind was clouded by grief and anger, suffering under the strain of seeing Tubbo in such a bad state. Wilbur was deathly worried for the kid. But to Tommy, the foundation of his world had just been torn away. He and Tubbo had always been untouched by the problems of the wider galaxy.

Wilbur smiled wanly. Maybe that had partially been his fault. Tommy would never have thought he was invincible if Wilbur had just curbed his ego.

...no. Tommy was better off growing up without those kinds of restrictions, ego and all.

"How are you?" Wilbur asked quietly once he'd caught up to his padawan.

Tommy shot him a half-hearted glare. "I'm fucking great, Will," he snapped. "Tubbo is still in there, and it's been days. No one's doing anything to help him! We're all just standing around like-" The blond boy cut himself off with a dramatic huff. Had they not been walking, Wilbur imagined that Tommy would have crossed his arms petulantly.

"Don't call me Will," Wilbur said, which earned a small smile from his padawan. "You're right, though. We're not doing much for him. Is Sapnap there?"

Tommy looked at him for a long, long moment. "Yeah, he's there," his padawan said eventually. "He's gonna keep an eye on him while he sleeps. Why did you say that I'm right? Did I say something wrong? If this is a test, I swear to the gods, Wilbur..."

Shame and sadness mixed Wilbur's chest, and he suddenly felt very, very tired. "You really think I'd do that to you?" he murmured.

Tommy's eyes immediately filled with guilt, and he looked away from Wilbur's gaze. However, their bond still pulsed with regret.

The two of them reached the infirmary doors after a few more minutes. As soon as Wilbur left the smell of bacta and disinfectant behind, the sick feeling in his head washed away. A single deep breath made him feel as if he'd gotten a full night's rest.

A full night's rest. Ha. Wilbur hadn't had one of those in weeks.

"I'm glad to be out of there," Tommy muttered. "It gets stuffy if I stay there too long. Plus, you can kind of feel the people around you, and that gets really uncomfortable after a while." The blond boy shuddered. "It doesn't matter. Where are we going?"

Wilbur thought for a moment. He had been planning to head back to the task force and look through a couple more files, but... maybe a change of plans was in order.

"Follow me," Wilbur said breezily, taking a sharp right and heading towards the Temple entrance.

"To where?" Tommy demanded. "Why are we leaving the Temple?"

"It doesn't matter, Tommy. Just follow me."

"You already fucking said that!"

After a few minutes, Tommy's complaints finally settled down. Wilbur was glad for that, though his padawan quickly found something else to talk about once a Knight accidentally ran into him. While Tommy ranted about "the disrespect of kids these days" (which made him sound like an aged grandpa), Wilbur's thoughts drifted to Techno's story from the previous day. Had Delphina really confronted Sapnap and Eret? Wilbur hadn't had a chance to talk to either of them, but he desperately curious as to what the full story was.

"Hey, Wilbur? Wilbur, are you listening to me?"

Fingers suddenly snapped in front of his face. Wilbur scowled, and he grabbed Tommy's fingers, twisting them backward and pulling a sharp yelp from his padawan. "Do that again, and I'll fucking break your hand," Wilbur warned lowly. "Don't call me Wilbur."

Wilbur released Tommy's hand, and the boy retrieved it with a pained whine.

"I won't, Holy Kantos," Tommy muttered. "I was just asking what you thought about Eret."

The lecture on the tip of Wilbur's tongue died. "That's an odd subject for you to be asking me about," he noted. "What brought that on?"

Tommy shrugged, and the motion was markedly defensive. "I dunno. I was thinking about Knights and Jedi and stuff and... I just want to know if I should be worried about him killing me in my sleep."

"He won't kill you," Wilbur chuckled. He steadfastly ignored the lump that had just appeared in his throat, because holy shit, did Tommy trust his judgment? "I doubt he'd do so much as hit you. Eret's a little suspicious with the shit he's been doing, but I think his heart is in the right place. He's not out to hurt anyone. He just wants to protect the Temple and the Order."

Tommy grumbled unintelligibly for a moment before he spoke again. "But... he's on the Council. Are we sure that we can trust him?"

Wilbur hesitated.

Over the years, he'd influenced Tommy more than anyone else in the boy's life. Except for Tubbo, Tommy spent basically all of his time with Wilbur. And, as time had gone on and Tommy had grown up, Wilbur had directly impacted Tommy's perception of the world. Mainly, that of the Jedi Order and the Council.

Wilbur had his own reasons to despise the Council (and, admittedly, some of the Jedi that he shared the title with). But he was starting to understand that he'd rubbed off on Tommy more than he'd ever realized. What had given Wilbur the right to tell Tommy that the leaders of their Order, the basis of their very *lives*, were corrupt and untrustworthy? Even though Wilbur thought they were, what had possessed him to try to play the gods?

Vanity, maybe. Selfish pride. It didn't matter anymore. All Wilbur could do was try to correct the mistakes he'd made.

"Tommy," Wilbur began slowly. But before he could get the rest of his sentence out, Tommy interrupted him with a string of mocking gibberish. The fuck was his padawan doing?

"Listen, without you around, I'd be a better person," Tommy said, once he'd stopped babbling incoherently. "I mean... maybe. But, Will, look, you're right about the Council. Even if you'd never said a thing, I would have put it together myself. Do you remember when I was 12, and Master Jahra smacked me because I asked a stupid question?"

Wilbur did. It had taken all of Techno and Philza's combined strength and persuasive power to keep him from bitch-slapping the other Jedi Master into the next year.

"I do," Wilbur said grudgingly.

Tommy cracked a grin. "Yeah, well, I never forgot that. Kinda hard to forget. Anyways, I started watching everyone in this bitch to see which ones were like Jahra, and which ones were like y-" The blond boy's cheeks suddenly colored, and he coughed into his fist. "My gift helped, too, y'know. I'm just trying to say that... you..."

Tommy fell silent, and his whole body hunched. Wilbur wasn't sure if it was from embarrassment or frustration or something else entirely, but his chest constricted. On a whim, Wilbur wrapped an arm around his padawan's shoulders. Tommy's head jostled Wilbur's jaw every couple of steps, and Wilbur was probably keeping Tommy from standing straight. But neither of them protested the position.

If he could go back, Wilbur would have been more physical with Tommy. Not in a correctional way, like the old Jedi Masters' practice of slapping hands. Just hugs or high-fives. Something to make Tommy less standoffish.

"You can't change that about me," Tommy grumbled. "I'm not into the whole 'touchy-feely' thing."

Wilbur smiled faintly. "Yeah, I know you aren't," he murmured. He squeezed Tommy's shoulder and decided not to comment on the way that his padawan's Force presence glowed happily. "Not into the whole 'touchy-feely thing,'" his ass.

Though Wilbur had to admit, he was more clingy than usual as well. Why, he wasn't sure. The two of them hadn't been in any mortal danger thus far. During the First and Second Temple Sieges, they'd run around the Temple undisturbed. And, when the communications center had collapsed, both of them had had sturdy things to grab onto. They hadn't been so much as scratched by the attacks.

Maybe that was why Wilbur was nervous. How long would it be until he or Tommy ran out of luck? After all... they couldn't keep cheating fate.

Those were questions for another day (or perhaps, never).

After an uneventful journey out of the Temple and into the nearby shopping district, Wilbur finally stopped Tommy in front of a small cart.

“What's this?” Tommy asked, squinting at the line of people. “It looks like a youngling field trip out here.”

Wilbur chuckled. “Tommy, it's an ice-cream stall.”

Tommy was silent for a moment as he stared at the cart, surrounded by laughing people and manned by a grinning alien. Finally, he gave Wilbur a sidelong look. “Why are you doing this?” he asked suspiciously.

“I feel like you'd punch me if I say this is for you,” Wilbur said dryly, and his padawan spluttered loudly. “So this is for me. I wanted ice cream, and I dragged you along with me.”

Tommy continued to mutter about “this bullshit” and how he had “better things to do with my time.” But, once they reached the front of the line, Tommy eagerly ordered two scoops of some exotic red ice cream that Wilbur couldn't even pronounce the name of. The padawan happily wandered off, mouth stained red, while Wilbur tossed the vendor a grateful smile and laid out a couple of extra credits.

The two of them walked down a few streets, then hopped onto a low wall to enjoy their treats. Tommy swung his legs a little as he sat, and Wilbur barely kept from laughing. Sometimes, even he forgot that his padawan was still a kid.

Between the sun and the gentle glow of Tommy's Force presence, Wilbur was lulled into a state of peace that he hadn't had in weeks. As he finished the last dredges of his ice cream (a simple mint and spice), he closed his eyes and tilted his face up to the sunshine. It was a beautiful day.

Wilbur should have known better than to ever relax.

Pain suddenly spiked through their bond, and Tommy let out a strangled noise. Wilbur's eyes snapped open. He twisted to face his padawan and found Tommy clutching his head, eyes wide and mouth open in a silent scream. Through their bond, fear and anger and despair whirled in a terrible tempest.

“Tommy?” Wilbur demanded. He grabbed his padawan's shoulders and shook him gently. “Tommy, come back to me. Follow my voice. You're safe; you're not in danger. Come back.”

When Tommy had been younger, his extraordinary gift had sometimes filled his mind with too many thoughts and voices. Once he'd learned how to shield, the problem had basically gone away. But now...

*What's he feeling?* Wilbur thought worriedly. *Gods, come on, Tommy.*

After a few agonizing seconds, the glaze over Tommy's eyes finally cleared. The blond boy blinked a couple of times, then looked around dazedly. Wilbur let out a shaky breath. “There are you,” he said, trying and failing to keep the tremble from his voice. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I'm alright,” Tommy mumbled. The padawan's face creased in a frown. “I don't... I don't

know where that came from. I think-”

Tommy's face paled by three shades. A creeping realization crawled into Wilbur's mind, and his heart sank.

“That was from Tubbo, wasn't it?” he asked quietly.

His padawan nodded.

“Gods.” Wilbur released Tommy's shoulders, and he pressed his palms into his eyes for just a moment before drawing his shoulders back. “Okay, uh... how's he feeling now?”

Tommy shrugged helplessly. “I dunno, it's all gone. I think he's okay.”

The misery in Tommy's eyes made Wilbur's chest ache. All they wanted was some peace. Just a few days to pretend that things were okay and chase away the gloom that lingered at the edges of their minds. More than anything, Wilbur wanted to keep Tommy's spirits up. Even now, his padawan's bright eyes had returned to a dull quality, and he stared blankly at his dropped ice cream.

Wilbur refused to let Tommy fade.

“Come on,” he said, and he jumped down from the wall.

Tommy followed him, albeit with a confused frown. “Where are we going now?” the blond boy asked tiredly. “I already told you that Sapnap is with Tubbo. We don't have to go check on him.”

Wilbur gently grabbed Tommy's arm and began dragging him down the road. “We're going to talk to Philza and Techno,” Wilbur said, ignoring his padawan's protests at being manhandled. “Look, Tommy, they're stronger than you and me. Either they'll be able to feel what's wrong with Tubbo, or they'll have a contact that knows.”

Besides, the two Jedi Masters had already been wracking their brains to figure it out. Maybe they'd come up with something.

Once they reached the Temple entrance, Tommy broke the silence hanging over them. “Are we just going to interrupt them?” he asked. “For all we know, Master Philza could be having another surgery or something.”

Wilbur grinned, and he glanced at his wrist communicator just to make sure that the timing was right. “If they were at the infirmary, maybe,” he agreed. “But they're not at the infirmary.”

Five minutes of walking later, Wilbur was proved right. Techno and Phil stood in the middle of the training arena. Following its destruction in the Second Temple Siege, the Council had prioritized its reconstruction. Wilbur had to admit, the contractors had done a damn good job. The arena just about glittered in the sunlight.

As they approached the ramp, Tommy leaned closer to him. “What are they doing out here?” the blond boy asked quietly. “I thought Philza was supposed to be resting.”

“I'm sure Techno's thinking the same thing,” Wilbur whispered back. Tommy's snort of laughter brought a grin to his face.

Phil turned to face them as soon as they stepped into the arena. “Morning, boys!” the Jedi Master called cheerfully. “Are you here to help me train?”



Techno looked severely less chipper than his partner. "If you are, go away," the pig Jedi said flatly, which made Phil burst out laughing. "We shouldn't even be here. I'm trying to convince Phil to go back to the infirmary, where he's supposed to be."

The two Jedi Masters dropped into quieter tones, and a hushed debate passed between them. Not the first time, Wilbur was reminded of why he'd taught Tommy differently. He wanted his padawan to be a person and have friends that meant everything to him, just like Techno and Phil.

Just like the four of them, really. Wilbur would do anything to protect Techno and Phil, and gods knew that he'd die to keep Tommy safe. Though he prayed that things never came to that.

Techno and Phil finished their conversation, and Techno strode away with a heavy sigh. Phil, still beaming, beckoned Wilbur and Tommy over.

"Techno thinks I should still be resting," Phil chuckled, once Wilbur and Tommy stood next to him. "I barely managed to convince him to let me come out here."

"I agree with him," Wilbur said dryly. "Phil, you just underwent major trauma and several surgeries. Don't you think you should take a break?"

Phil waved a dismissive hand. "I'm fine. Really, Will, I am. This is the best I've felt in a while."

"That's probably because you're old," Tommy chipped in brightly. Wilbur turned a death stare on his padawan, and the blond boy took a defensive step back. "What? Why are you looking at me like that?"

"Go help Techno with whatever the fuck he's doing," Wilbur ordered.

"He's turning on the training droids," Phil supplied. A wicked glint gleamed in the other man's eyes. "It takes a bit of heavy lifting to get the new doors open. I'm sure you'll be able to help."

Tommy muttered something unsavory under his breath (which Wilbur chose to ignore), then did as he was told and shuffled over to Techno. As soon as Tommy joined the pig Jedi on the other side of the training arena, the two began jostling elbows.

"It won't take long before they start shouting at each other," Phil noted lightly.

Wilbur sighed. "I know."

Phil chuckled, and Wilbur glanced at the other Jedi Master. Even though dark bags still hung under his eyes, Phil *did* look good. The Jedi Master's icy eyes were bright with life, and the scars on his neck were all but faded. Phil even held his lightsaber confidently in his durasteel hand.

But there was something different in his Force presence. Wilbur had wondered when the change would happen, and it seemed that since Phil was up and about again, it was starting to take effect.

"Phil," Wilbur began slowly. The other Jedi Master glanced at him with a broad smile, and Wilbur almost lost his nerve. "Do... do you know what Techno did for you?"

Phil's smile dimmed. His shoulders rose and fell in a tired sigh, and slowly, his eyes turned to Techno, who was still bickering with Tommy. "Yeah," he murmured. "I feel it. But I haven't talked to him yet. I don't really know how to bring something like that up."

Wilbur looked over at Techno and Tommy. The pig Jedi had pushed his sleeves up, and even from across the arena, Wilbur could see the new scar that trailed up Techno's left arm. "Are you mad at

him?" he asked quietly.

"No. I'd have done the same for him. It's just... it's kind of scary to know that I was that close to death."

Phil sighed heavily, and the exhaustion in his face reminded Wilbur that he wasn't here to pester. He only had one objective, and that was to get Tubbo help. Whether or not Phil chose to talk to his partner wasn't Wilbur's business.

"Listen, I came here to talk to you and Techno," Wilbur said, restarting their conversation.

The darkness immediately lifted from Phil's face. "Oh, sure."

"It's about Tubbo." Wilbur took a deep breath, held it, then began talking. "Tommy and I went into the shopping district about half an hour ago. While we were out there, Tommy got hit with this... wave. I think Tubbo had a nightmare, and he projected it to Tommy. I mean, it's not surprising, but holy fucking Kantos... you'd have thought that Tommy heard Tubbo die. It was horrible. I... I just wanted to know if you and Techno had any ideas."

Wilbur ran out of air, and he took a gasping breath.

Phil was silent as Wilbur replenished his lungs. Finally, the Jedi Master muttered, "If I ever meet the son of a bitch who's done all of this to us, I'm going to kill him." Before Wilbur could get enough air to respond to *that*, Phil raised his voice. "Tommy, Techno! Get over here!"

The two in question jogged back over, still jostling elbows as they went.

"Tommy, tell me what happened," Phil said once the four of them were arranged in a broken circle. "Explain it as best you can, okay?"

Tommy's face paled once again, and he pressed against Wilbur's side a little. Wilbur sent a wave of calm through their bond, and slowly, his padawan's shoulders relaxed.

"It was awful," Tommy murmured. "It was like... you know when you're really, really scared of something? So scared that you can't even move? That's how it felt. At first, I thought all that fear and shit belonged to me because it was so real. But it wasn't. Tubbo was terrified. And I felt..."

Tommy glanced at Techno. The pig Jedi's face darkened.

"You felt the echoes again?" Techno asked.

Wilbur frowned, glancing between his padawan and Techno. "Echoes?" he repeated. "The fuck's an echo?"

"It's a sort of lingering presence after someone uses a lot of Force power," Phil explained absently. "Sometimes, you can even tell where someone died. You felt echoes from Tubbo, Tommy?"

Tommy nodded.

Wilbur pursed his lips, and he folded his arms across his chest. He'd never been the strongest with the Force. But Wilbur knew enough to know that simple nightmares were looking less and less likely as the cause for Tubbo's pain.

"Alright," Phil said suddenly, breaking the brief silence. "Techno, forget the droids for now. I think we should sneak out and talk to August. She'll probably have some ideas."

Techno nodded a little. “We should probably ask Rhodys first, though. Technically, I’m still on leave.”

“Yeah, that’s less trouble for us. Let’s go.”

Techno and Phil strode towards the ramp in natural synchronization, and Wilbur stared at the pair. “Where are you going?” he shouted after them, once he remembered how to speak. “Who the fuck is August? Or do we lowly peasants not need to know such classified details?”

“I’ll send you a message later!” Phil shouted back. “I promise!”

The two Jedi Masters disappeared out of the arena.

“Fucking hell,” Wilbur muttered. “And here I thought that we’d get an actual explanation. Looks like we’re not important enough.” Tommy didn’t respond to the dry aside, and Wilbur frowned, glancing at his padawan. “Tommy?”

Tommy stared at the floor of the arena, eyes wide and dull. In the short time that Techno and Phil had decided on a plan of action, the blond boy had slipped away.

Wilbur nudged Tommy roughly. “Hey.”

“I’m listening!” Tommy snapped. His eyes came back into focus, and he shot Wilbur a dirty look. “I just didn’t hear that last thing you said. What’d you say?”

Wilbur sighed, disappointed with the feeble attempt at misdirection, but he allowed a smile to creep over his face. “Come here. I want to do something before we leave.”

Wilbur led the way into the middle of the arena, and Tommy followed him with a surprising amount of obedience. Wilbur set them up on opposite sides of the Inner Ring, then began circling it slowly. After a moment, Tommy did the same.

“What are we doing?” Tommy asked hesitantly. “I’m going to get dizzy.”

“Shush,” Wilbur ordered gently. “Close your eyes.”

“Wilbur, I’ll crash into you if I do that. Or I’ll just stumble out of this nice little ring.”

“No, you won’t. Close your eyes.”

Tommy closed his eyes with a huff. Once he was sure that his padawan wasn’t going to break the rule, Wilbur closed his eyes as well. He couldn’t see or feel anything except for Tommy’s presence, burning brightly across the ring from him.

“This will only work if we follow each other,” Wilbur called. “Harmony and balance, Tommy. Empty your mind and follow me.”

Emotions immediately flooded their bond. Surface thoughts came with them, speaking of Tommy’s frustration and exhaustion. But everything was shallow. As Wilbur followed his padawan, he instinctively knew that they had wandered out of the Inner Ring.

“You’re not letting go, Tommy,” Wilbur said. Annoyance flashed across their bond, and he added, “That’s not a bad thing. It’s good to remember what happened, so you don’t make the same mistakes over and over. But grudges will never help you.”

Wilbur was a hypocrite. But he would never be perfect, so the best he could do was make Tommy

better than he was.

From across the circle, a few more of Tommy's emotions entered the fray. Tommy was afraid. He didn't want to die, and he didn't want anyone he cared about to die- especially Tubbo.

“Good,” Wilbur said soothingly. “Emotions aren't bad, Tommy. It's never wrong to feel things.”

Tommy was angry. He wanted to tear down the Council for the bullshit it was pulling, and he wanted to personally hunt down whoever was causing the Order so much pain.

“That's it.”

More than anything... Tommy wanted to rest. Just for once, he wanted to go to bed without wondering if he'd wake up to another apocalyptic disaster. He was exhausted... and everything was starting to wear him down.

Wilbur smiled faintly. “There you go, Tommy,” he murmured. He felt everything that his padawan did. Tommy's soul was far too worn for someone of his age, but, if nothing else, Wilbur was glad that his padawan had opened up. That was the first step to healing.

But then... Wilbur extended his mind a little, and he realized that they weren't lined up with the Inner Ring. In fact, they were in the Middle Ring.

“Will, you have to do it, too.”

Wilbur almost opened his eyes at that. “I'm not talking about my feelings, Tommy,” he scoffed. “This is an exercise for you, not me. Don't call me Will.”

“How's it supposed to work for me if you're not doing it too? Didn't you just say that this is an exercise in balance?”

Shit. Tommy had listened to him for once.

“It is,” Wilbur agreed cautiously. “But I *am* balanced.”

“Then why are we in the Outer Ring?”

Wilbur quickly checked. They were so far away from the Inner Ring that they were in danger of crashing into the walls of the arena.

“Just start with something, Will. Anything.”

Wilbur ground his teeth. He didn't want to talk about his feelings with his *padawan* of all people. While Tommy could read his mind most of the time, Wilbur was careful to keep his darkest thoughts and deepest fears buried underneath his strongest mental shields. There was a fine line between vulnerability and oversharing.

“Wilbur, when's the last time you told me anything about how you're feeling? Happy, sad, angry? Lonely? Tired? Anything? You don't. Say *anything*.”

*No*, Wilbur thought stubbornly. *This won't help.*

*You don't know that.*

*I do, actually, Tommy. I know that it won't.*

*Oh, in Tibulta's Name, just fucking say something!*

Frustration bloomed in his chest, and Wilbur finally broke. He admitted how afraid he was, that he was powerless against the onslaught that barraged the Temple. In the face of people more powerful, Wilbur was almost defenseless. He'd never been strong with the Force or notably skilled in lightsaber combat. His strength laid within his mind. But witty jokes and a fascination with geography and history didn't help in a war.

They moved away from the walls of the arena.

Wilbur's fatigue drove into his very bones. He was so, *so* tired. He was about a week away from falling apart, and gods knew that he wouldn't be strong enough to get up again.

They stepped into the Middle Ring.

Tommy was in perpetual danger, and Wilbur couldn't do a fucking thing about it. He could provide the task force with his skills, but beyond that, he was helpless. The pressure of knowing that he was inadequate to protect his padawan wore on him every waking hour.

They were almost back to the Inner Ring.

In the deepest parts of his soul, Wilbur wanted to run. He wanted to take his friends and flee Coruscant, leaving the Order to defend itself. What had the Council ever done for them, really? Wilbur had been left to fend for himself throughout his life, even as a padawan. His Master had been shit. Wilbur wanted Tommy to live long enough to see a happy life, away from the confines of a loveless Order. Wilbur wanted Tommy to have a better life than he'd had, wherever that would be.

They stepped back into the Inner Ring.

Wilbur opened his eyes. His shoulders shuddered, and his hands shook, but he refused to give in to the tears.

"Do you know why I haven't left?"

Wilbur glanced up. Tommy's head was bowed.

"I could have left," Tommy continued shakily. He lifted his head, and Wilbur realized that his padawan's face was streaked with tears. "Between me and Tubbo, we could leave this planet whenever we want. Go anywhere. Become anything."

Wilbur took a careful step towards his padawan. "What's stopping you?" he asked softly.

Tommy let out a trembling laugh. "You, Will," he croaked. "You, Philza, Techno. I can't just leave you guys. I... I know the Order isn't perfect. But nowhere would be perfect. And it doesn't matter that you're not perfect either. You're doing good things here. I remember all the missions that you've taken me on. You're a diplomat, Will, and you're really fucking good at it. I want to do the same amount of good that you've done. And it seems like being a Jedi is the best way to do that."

Wilbur's legs suddenly felt very unsteady. He swallowed the lump in his throat and asked, "You want to be a Jedi?"

"Yes!" More tears rolled down Tommy's cheeks. "You've taught me that we give life our own purpose, even in the middle of enemies and all the shit of life. I have you and Tubbo, even Philza and Technoblade. You're good people. I've never even had to worry about a meal. This is a good

life. I'm... I'm happy here.”

Tommy's frame suddenly began to shake, and he buried his hands in his robes. “I don't want this to go away,” he whispered. “If the Temple is destroyed... all of this goes away. I don't want that. I don't want to die.”

Wilbur's legs moved without conscious thought. He hurried to Tommy and dragged his padawan into a tight hug. Tommy buried his face in his shoulder, and Wilbur felt tears stain his robes. But he didn't care. He just held his sobbing padawan as close as he could and prayed that the gods would hear them.

“We'll make it through this, Tommy,” Wilbur whispered. “The Order won't lay down and die to these fuckers.”

Tommy didn't respond, but the agony that wrapped around his Force presence eased ever so slightly.

Wilbur rested his head against Tommy's and closed his eyes. They *would* make it.

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When George opened his eyes, he was greeted by darkness. He sat up, instantly awake, and rubbed the last vestiges of sleep from his eyes. Apparently, even after a draining couple of days, his body refused to let him sleep in.

George sighed and swung his legs over the edge of his bed. Clay was still sound asleep, and the taller man's quiet snores were the only sound in the otherwise silent room. George smiled slightly. Clay didn't need to wake up at 5:30 in the morning, as George's body had so rudely decided he did. George would wake him up around 6:30.

With a plan in mind, George slipped into his boots and strode out of the bedroom. He navigated in the near pitch-black using the mental map that he'd built, and thankfully, he'd only made a couple of small errors. His shins remained blessedly unbruised.

The first order of business was to check their lodgings. George quickly made sure that no new items had materialized in the night, and he did a perfunctory sweep for bugs. Both searches came up clean.

Next, he stepped through the fresher. The Underworld had a tendency to make one's hair disgustingly oily, and George was relieved to be clean again.

George's third task was to eat breakfast, but he paused as he stepped out of the bathroom.

Clay was sitting up in his bed, facing the wall.

George frowned and checked his wrist communicator. It was barely 6. Had he somehow woken Clay while he'd been sneaking around their boarding?

“Good morning,” George said, flipping on the lights and crossing the room. “How'd you sleep?”

Clay didn't respond. George pinched himself, just in case he was still asleep and was having some sort of odd dream. But, no, he was awake. Clay just wasn't reacting to him. George strode around the taller man's bed so he could look the Jedi Master in the eyes.

“Clay?” George tried again as he walked. “What are you-”

He froze.

Clay's usually bright eyes were fixed on the wall with dull attention. His skin was pale, and his lips were slack. The other man looked like a living ghost.

"Tibulta, Clay," George muttered, and he ignored the way that his skin crawled at the sight of his friend. "You look terrible. Did you sleep at all?"

Clay was silent for a long, long moment. Just as George was considering getting his staff to shock Clay out of his reverie, the Jedi Master spoke.

"Something's wrong with Tubbo," Clay rasped. His voice was broken and cracked, and as he spoke, pain filled his eyes. "There's something... he's being hurt. He's hurt. Someone is... no, there's... I can't tell. He's..."

George suddenly noticed that Clay's hands were clenched into fists, and his knuckles were white. "Snap out of it, Clay," he demanded. Nerves threatened to shake his voice, and George steeled himself against his fear. "It's okay. Tubbo's fine, remember? He woke up before we left. Nick's looking after him."

"No," Clay murmured. He sounded like he was in a trance. "He's not... he's not fine. There's..."

Something in the Jedi Master's glazed eyes unsettled George beyond what he could handle, and he decided it was time for an intervention. He raced into the other room, dug his staff out of his bag, and rushed back. "Sorry, Clay," George muttered with a grimace. Then he drove the staff into Clay's leg.

The taller man jittered with electric arcs, and almost immediately, his eyes came back into focus. "Holy shit!" Clay gasped. "Oh, *gods*, that hurt!" The Jedi Master gave George an incredulous look, and George was relieved to see that Clay looked like himself again. "That's the second time you've done that to me! What the *fuck*!?"

"Sorry," George said sheepishly. He tossed his staff back into his bag as nonchalantly as he could. "You were acting weird *again*. Do you remember what just happened?"

Clay frowned, silent for a moment. "Yeah," he said slowly. "I do. I felt... gods, I could have sworn that I felt something from Tubbo."

George considered the vague explanation and liked it no better than the trance Clay had undergone. "Nightmare?" he suggested. "From either one of you?"

Clay scoffed. "Wouldn't be the first time," he grumbled, rubbing his eyes.

The two of them stood still for a moment as Clay continued to rub his eyes and mutter nonsense. George, unsure as to whether the other man was back to normal, asked, "So... you're okay?"

Clay cracked a tired smile. "Yeah, I'm fine. Sorry for freaking you out."

That was good enough. George smiled in return, then headed out of the bedroom. He still hadn't had breakfast, which was becoming a high priority on his list of things to do. He was *starving*.

Five minutes later, George had reheated last night's steaks (hard-earned, he might add. It had taken far too long to find meat that wasn't of an... unsavory ilk) and settled himself at the table. The mere smell of the meal was enough to make his mouth water. He looked up to tell Clay to eat, but again, the sight of the other man gave him pause.

Clay now sat in the middle of his bed, staring at his hands as if they weren't his own.

George hesitated. On the one hand, he desperately needed to eat. But he couldn't abandon Clay to whatever was going on in the taller man's head.

After a few seconds' internal debate, George reluctantly stood and headed back into the bedroom. "What's wrong?" he asked, sinking onto the edge of Clay's bed.

The Jedi Master glanced up, and his hair drifted around his face. "I'm just tired," he chuckled. "I already told you that."

George snorted. "We're always tired; that's not an excuse. Seriously, what's going on? I want to help."

Clay leaned back against his pillows with a silent sigh, holding up his hands to the luminescent light in the ceiling. The bandages were still in place, so George wasn't entirely sure why Clay's hands warranted such intense examination. However, George used the lapse in conversation to look over Clay's face again. He still wasn't used to all the scars. But he was starting to see old familiarities amongst the new.

There was a tiny scar at the edge of Clay's right eyebrow that he'd gotten while playing with a knife (careless idiot). His nose was still a little crooked after being by Nick during a practice fight (careless idiot #2), and his eyes glittered with intelligence.

Said emerald eyes suddenly shifted to meet George's, and George pulled himself out of his silent introspection.

"It's weird being down here," Clay murmured. "To see what you had to work with, y'know? Like, I always knew that you lived down here, but it wasn't... it wasn't real until now." Clay sighed heavily, and his hands flopped to his sides. "I don't know."

George fiddled with the hem of his shirt. He'd known that this conversation would come, eventually, but that made it no easier. "It's not really so bad down here," he began hesitantly. "I know it probably looks terrible, but... it's okay. I was lucky enough to not be useless."

Clay's gaze was piercing. "It still couldn't have been easy for you."

George hesitated. Too clearly did he remember his earliest nights in the Underworld. He'd stuck to the shadows, slinking from building to building and stealing all scraps he could find. At the time, he'd just wanted to get as far away from the Temple as possible.

"It wasn't," George admitted. "But I'm good with my hands. I took a job for this small-time street hustler looking to make a name for himself. I just wanted to pay for a few meals. But, as it turned out, he was working for a bigger boss. News of my handiwork spread, and before I knew it, I was getting jobs from every level. Then I saved up until I had enough to buy my shop. Did Nick tell you about it? It's nice. Level 4001. It was almost a home to me."

Clay chuckled quietly, and the sound made George smile. "I'll have to visit someday," the taller man said, a fond smile touching his face. "Did anyone ever try to rob you? Seems like you would have been a hot target."

*"There he is! Maybe he'll give some money to street urchins like us! Hey, big shot! You remember your roots? You remember your fucking roots?! We didn't forget you!"*

*"This is the infamous 404? Pathetic. Take whatever he has on him."*



*"You're a human? Ugh. I thought you were an actual engineer."*

Countless nights sitting awake, waiting to see if someone would bomb his shop. Countless nights waiting for the sound of an Underworld army marching to get him.

"I was a target," George said eventually. He carefully schooled his face into a neutral expression before continuing. "But reputation comes with time, whether you like it or not. People stopped messing with me once they realized that they couldn't bribe and they couldn't threaten me."

Clay's eyes darkened. "But they tried," the taller man muttered. He ran a finger down his neck, and George's hand instinctively flew to the series of scars that shattered down his right shoulder. "Did they get close?"

George smiled wanly, and he covered his scars with a hand. It was pointless, though. His hands had scars of their own. "They did," he said evenly. "But they never got me. I think that's what matters."

"But they never got me," Clay repeated slowly. "Gods. I wouldn't have survived down here."

George almost chuckled. "Sure you would have," he said lightly. "You've always been stronger than me, Clay. You could have taken down half the people I've fought without even trying."

"That's only because of the Force, George. People don't respect Force-wielders down here. Hell, most of them either can't feel anything, or they ignore it. If they were like me, they'd-"

Clay cut himself off with a huff, and he pressed his palms into his eyes. Even though the "If they were like me" comment stung a bit (for reasons he couldn't quite put his finger on), George took a good look at the taller man. It was then that he finally noticed the strained quality of Clay's Force presence.

"What have you been keeping from me?" George asked quietly.

"It doesn't matter," Clay muttered, his voice muffled through his hands.

"It does matter. What are you feeling?"

Clay tore his hands away from his face with manic energy. "Everything!" the Jedi Master snapped. "Fucking everything! I feel like I'm going insane! Around every fucking corner, there are whispers and echoes and hotspots, and no one else notices! I heard an echo downstairs last night, and guess what I learned when I listened to it? Someone died down there, George! This hub is stained!"

The taller man crumped in half and pressed his face into his bed, letting out a muffled scream. George could only watch him, stunned.

Had he really drifted so far from the Force that he couldn't hear echoes anymore? George had genuinely thought that he still heard echoes in their entirety, which accounted for his "sixth sense." But... it seemed like that wasn't the case. Somehow, that made him feel lonely.

"We can leave," George said softly. "There are plenty of other hubs around here. I mean, the Night Thief is on level 2087. We can go up."

Clay lifted his face from his bed with a pained look. "No, it's fine," he mumbled. "I got it out. I feel better. I'm really sorry that I didn't say anything. I thought it was stupid, and I didn't..." Clay's face twisted into a grimace. "Yeah, I'm... I'm really sorry."

Once, George would have been angry at Clay for not mentioning something like a *death echo* in

*the hub that they were staying at. But now, George had seen people die in front of him. He knew that the Underworld would forever be a bloodstained place. So he just put a gentle hand on Clay's shoulders (making sure to keep his fingers on the taller man's shirt) and squeezed lightly.*

*"Don't worry about it," George murmured. "As long as you can live with hearing them, it's okay. We'll be out of here soon enough."*

*Clay nodded miserably, and the two of them lapsed into silence. Now that George was thinking about it, he felt strange having not told Clay about his time in the Underworld. He'd dropped pieces here and there, but never a full story. George had used to tell Clay everything.*

*And he desperately wanted to get back to that time.*

*"You wanna know how I met Zulek?" George asked, unable to keep from grinning a little.*

*Clay glanced at him, and the taller man's eyebrows lifted slightly. "I'm all ears."*

*George stood and rolled his left sleeve up, revealing the burn scar that wrapped around his wrist. "I dunno if you know this, but they used to be a slave worker down on level 731," George began. Clay's face creased, and George nodded. "Yeah. I went down there because I heard that someone had a part I needed for a build. Turns out, the slave traders literally ran the level."*

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*George gritted his teeth against the pain from the electro-whip. "I'm not here to steal anything!" he barked. "I'm an engineer! I heard that-" George gasped as the whip tightened and burned deeper into his skin. "Gods-damn you! I'm here for a Deltian coil!"*

*"We've heard every tall tale under the moons, slave," one of the guards growled. He was beefy, and his muscles seemed too swollen for his armor. "It'll take more than knowing something about machines to fool us."*

*"I'm not lying!" George howled. "And I'm not one of your slaves! Let me go!"*

*The guard holding the whip took a step closer to George, dragging him to his knees as they went. "You are now," they chuckled darkly. "You should have known better than to come down here, little boy. The Underworld doesn't play nice."*

*George turned a death stare on the guard above him, steadfastly avoiding looking at his arm. If he looked at the burn, his body would go into shock. Focus, George told himself, grinding his teeth into his lip to keep losing himself to panic. I have a knife in my boot. If I can stab this idiot with the whip, I can use it on these other three idiots, but that would-*

*"Excuse me, Captain?"*

*The guards all whipped around. George twisted as best he could in his awkward position and found a Fosh with jet black feathers walking up to them.*

*"I heard a commotion," the Fosh continued, their voice as harsh as gravel. In the darkness of the alleyway, George could barely make the alien out. "Is there a problem, sir?"*

*The guard holding the whip gave the Fosh a wide smile. "No, no problem, F-07," they said, and their voice dripped with sugary sweetness. "We just caught one of our slaves trying to escape." This doesn't concern you."*

*The Fosh glanced down at George, and for a split second, George saw compassion in their eyes.*

*“I don't think that's one of your slaves, sir,” the Fosh said slowly. “If I may?”*

*The whip tightened, and George clenched his jaw to keep from screaming. But the guards allowed the Fosh to step closer. The Fosh (F-07?) crouched in front of George, gently taking his right arm and flipping it over. As F-07 examined his arm, George did the same. Wires ran along the Fosh's arm. They connected to some sort of device pressed against F-07's wrist, then disappeared into the skin near the elbow joint. While the Fosh conducted their examination, George worked through how he would disassemble the device. It was the only thing that kept him from passing out.*

*Finally, the Fosh released his arm. “He has no traces of scarring or wiring, sir,” they said evenly. “He's not a slave.”*

*The guards scowled in unison. For a moment, George thought that they would take him in a new slave regardless of what F-07 said. Then he realized that a crowd had gathered due to the Fosh prolonging their confrontation. Had not F-07 showed up, George would already have been snatched.*

*And the guards seemed to know it.*

*“Thank you for the analysis, F-07,” the guard holding the whip said, a too-big smile still plastered on their face. They released the whip's hold on George's wrist, and George hissed as the brand finally left his skin. “To reward you for your helpfulness, allow us to escort you to the tombs.”*

*The Fosh gave the guard a bitter smile. “Thank you, sir. Most kind.”*

*The guards moved away as one, sweeping the Fosh with them. As soon as they were gone, George collapsed and cradled his wrist to his chest. For a long moment, he could only squeeze his eyes against the pain. Finally, George forced himself to assess the damage.*

*A ring of angry red skin wrapped around his wrist and the cut ran so deep that George wasn't sure he could move without excruciating pain. Beyond the immediate damage point, his skin was blackened and peeling, charred from the excess sparks.*

*That's gonna leave a mark, George thought, his head spinning. I was lucky to get out of that with my life.*

*With a monumental effort, George hauled himself to his feet. The pain in his wrist was dizzying, but he didn't need joint mobility to walk. He turned himself towards the direction of his shuttle and began to shuffle down the street.*

*His conscious stopped him. How could George walk away knowing that that Fosh was going to suffer because of his ignorance?*

*George stood in the middle of the street for a moment. Then he growled under his breath and turned back around, hobbling in the direction he'd seen the guards leave.*

*Within minutes, George caught up. For the next half an hour, he trailed the guards and the Fosh through level 731. They made several stops along the way, picking up and dropping off other slaves, but finally, they arrived at a vast pit of lava. A factory stretched over the crater, supported by gargantuan pillars of metal that descended into the lava.*

*That definitely looks like a tomb, George thought morbidly. Probably feels like you're being cremated in there.*

*Below him, the guards took the Fosh into the factory. George hesitated for only a moment before he dropped from the shadows and slunk after the group. Instead of taking the door, George vaulted up the wall and crawled through a small porthole that he'd noticed.*

*As soon as he pulled himself into the building, he found that the factory was less of an automatic factory and more open-plan sweatshop. Pipes and furnaces were scattered everywhere, and rows and upon rows of weapons and materials shifted from one group of people to the next. Gaping vents acted as walkways, and through the vents, George could see lava. The heat was absolutely horrific. George couldn't even fathom what it felt like closer to the lava.*

*"We're dropping off F-07 again," one of the guards bellowed. He tossed the Fosh at another alien, who looked nothing short of bored. "They're staying here for a week this time."*

*The other alien responded with something George couldn't hear, and the guards left with raucous laughter. Once the slavers were gone, F-07 and the other alien began walking through the factory. George slid the rest of the way through the porthole and followed the pair from the gantry.*

*The other alien dropped the Fosh off at the end of a long conveyor belt, almost directly beneath George. F-07 nodded shortly, and the other alien left. The Fosh was basically alone.*

*Perfect.*

*George used the pipes on the wall to climb to the ground. He moved soundlessly, slinking between the huge furnaces until he was only about 20 feet away from the Fosh. In the light from a nearby vent, F-07's black feathers glittered like dark jewels, and green and purple highlights streaked along their head feathers and arms. The Fosh looked up as bored as the other alien had. This was clearly not their first time here.*

*George had no idea what this Fosh had done to deserve being a slave on this level. But he refused to leave them to rot after they'd saved him from the same fate.*

*He glanced around. A large pipe with a broom attached to one end sat nearby, supported only by a small bolt jammed into the wall. It looked like it could be knocked over with nothing more than a tap.*

*And, with all the commotion from the factory, it probably fell over often.*

*George snuck over to the pipe and nudged it with his toe. Sure enough, the pipe instantly began to tip over, even taking the bolt with it. Both crashed to the floor with an ear-shattering crash.*

*A chorus of groans rose from the nearest slaves. George allowed himself a satisfied smile.*

*"07, it's your turn," a voice called out. "We'll cover."*

*"Thank you, 56. That's just what I'd hoped you'd say."*

*A few people chuckled, and a moment later, F-07 rounded the corner. They hesitated for just a split second upon seeing George, then walked up to him as if nothing was unusual. They didn't even say a word.*

*George pulled a few tools from his belt and took the Fosh's wired arm. With his right hand, he balanced F-07's arm. With his left, he carefully pried the device off of the Fosh's skin. F-07 watched him silently, but their eyes were alight with keen curiosity.*

*After a good five minutes, George finally pulled the last wires from inside the Fosh's forearm. F-07*

*didn't even wince. Once George gathered the bundle of blood-soaked wires and technology, he released the Fosh's arm and tossed the bundle into a nearby vent. It sailed towards the lava without a noise.*

*George straightened and looked the Fosh in the eyes. They stared back at him, one eyebrow cocked.*

*George turned and scaled the pipes that had gotten him down to the factory floor, as silently as he had the first time. The Fosh followed him.*

*15 minutes later, George and the Fosh stood in the alleyway where they'd first met. George could barely move his burnt wrist, but he still held out his hand.*

*"404," George said. "I hope to meet you again someday."*

*The corners of the Fosh's mouth twitched in a smile, and they gently shook George's offered hand. "Zulek. I also believe our paths will cross again."*

---

"That is complete bullshit," Clay laughed. "You did all of that with a burn bad enough to cause *that* scar? Bull. Shit."

"It's true," George said dryly, rolling his sleeve back over his scar. "Yes, I omitted a few things. But it's a real story. Keep in mind, this was back when I'd just started developing a reputation. I'd only come up with the name '404' a few days before all of that happened."

Clay continued to laugh, and George let the taller man do so, even though it was at his expense. It had been a long time since he'd heard Clay laugh without any reservations.

"Okay, so let's say I believe that you did all of that with your burn," Clay said once his mirth had died down. "You helped Zulek just because they saved you? Doesn't that mean they owe you? Like, you could have just left, and you didn't. Why didn't you just leave?"

George rolled his eyes, and he sank next to Clay on the bed. "I told you. I couldn't walk away knowing that they saved my life. They're the only person I ever went back for, and it was because I still thought like a Jedi. I was young and naive. I don't know, I just wanted to help them."

Clay inclined his head slightly, and a more serious expression drifted across his face. "That's... very noble, actually. It didn't seem like you guys were friends when we met."

At that, George grinned a little. "We aren't. We're friends in the sense that I go to them first when I need to buy something, and they don't con me out of my money. Remember when they got us away from those bounty hunters? Yeah, that was our debt from this incident being settled. We're even now."

Clay chuckled, and he slung an arm around George's shoulders. "I can't believe this," he said, still chuckling. "My dear friend George, the angel of the Underworld."

"Shut up," George groaned, shoving at Clay's arms. "I'm not."

"Yes, you are! You saved Zulek from a lifetime of servitude!"

"Did you miss the part where I said that's the only time I ever saved someone?"

“But you still did it! The fact that it even happened once is insane!”

George got to his feet with a dramatic sigh, ignoring the pang in his chest from Clay's “kicked puppy” look. “I'm going to eat breakfast,” he said pointedly. “You can mope around in here some more if you want, but I'm going to die if I don't eat something.”

Clay protested as George left the bedroom, but George didn't look back again. He'd been starving before telling his story, and now, he was legitimately famished. George sank into his chair and tore into his (blessedly warm) steak.

Clay joined him a moment later. The taller man had slipped a jacket over his shoulders but otherwise hadn't changed from his sleeping clothes. George didn't even pause to mock him.

For a few minutes, they ate in silence. Then George took a moment to breathe, and he noticed something. The bandages on Clay's right had unraveled. One of the strips around his index finger had slipped away, revealing a sliver of unmarred skin. George swallowed his mouthful, then said, “I can see your hand.”

Clay immediately tucked the strip back into its place. “Thanks,” the taller man muttered. “I know it doesn't really matter, but-”

George held up a hand. “Don't worry about it,” he said mildly. “Scars are personal. You talk about them when you want to talk about them.” George thought of Ejas, Zulek, and all the other traders, vendors, and technicians he knew in the Underworld. They all bore horrific scars. “And sometimes, you never talk about them. It's fine.”

His words were met with silence. Then, ever so slowly, Clay's face softened into the warmest smile George had ever seen.

“Thank you, George,” Clay murmured. “You're a good man, you know that?”

George swallowed thickly, suddenly feeling very unsteady, and said, “So I've been told.”

Clay chuckled, and suddenly, his left hand slipped across the table and came to rest over George's. The taller man's thumb gently brushed over the scars on George's knuckles, his touch as light as a feather.

George's insides felt airy. For a long moment, all he could do was stare at the gentle touch and wonder dazedly why it brought him so much peace. Finally, he lifted his head, looking at Clay and trying to ask “why?”

His gaze was met by a soft smile and emerald eyes filled with nothing but kindness.

“I left you down here once,” Clay said softly. “I'm never doing that again. As soon as we're done down here, we're going back to the Temple. Alright?”

For just a split second, George mentally replaced the word “Temple” with something very different. “Home.”

“Okay,” he croaked. “Straight back.”

Clay grinned, and for the first time since arriving at the Temple, George saw Clay's eyes crinkle along with the grin. “That's the spirit. Eat fast. We've got a Night Thief to catch.”

## Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading! If you are so inclined, please leave a comment and let me know what you thought! Your feedback means the world to me <3

Again, I'm very sorry for the lack of a "finale" this week. Hopefully, next week's true finale makes up for the delay! I'll see you all then!

## Depths of the Earth, Part 5

### Chapter Notes

I delay the finale for a week? I return with 17k to sweep you off of your feet.

Hello, friends! I never planned for this arc to be this long, but it has been a hell of a good time. I truly loved every moment of this arc (including this final update), and I hope y'all like the conclusion as much as I do! Quite a bit of time went into this, and I really, really hope you can see the love and tears that I shed for it.

Once again, I apologize for updating so late lol. Fingers crossed that y'all are reading this at a reasonable time!

One last thing: trigger warning for semi-graphic descriptions of injury.

Alright, on with the story! Welcome to the finale of Depths of the Earth!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

As soon as Phil and Techno stepped into the small fortune teller's shop, Techno shuffled a step closer. Phil felt more than saw the movement, and he cracked a small smile. Techno was protective at the best of times. Now, it seemed that the pig Jedi was determined to protect Phil from every possible threat, including an old acquaintance of theirs.

Phil didn't mind, though. The fatigue in his bones was proof enough that he was nowhere near healed.

"Someone else is here," Techno muttered. "Backroom, no Force-sensitivity. It sounds like they're talking to August."

"That would make sense," Phil said mildly. "Most people come here to see her."

Techno shot him a dirty look, though it was undermined by the quirk of his lips. "Gee, Phil, I wouldn't have put that together. You're just too smart."

Phil chuckled. "I know. You don't have to tell me."

August's shop was cozy, especially compared to the evening chill. Phil was 90% sure that August purposefully made her shop warm to lull customers into a peaceful state, but it didn't work on him or Techno. However, the bits and bobs scattered on shelves and in bookcases did make the place seem inviting. Even the dark purples and blues of the shag carpets and tapestries spoke of a refined taste.

But cultured didn't mean trustworthy.

The door to August's inner chamber opened, and a Fosh with dark feathers stepped out. They closed the door softly behind them, then paused as their eyes fell on Phil and Techno.

"Have you been here before?" the Fosh asked slowly. Their voice was harsh with wear, and there was an undeniable gleam of intelligence in their eyes.



Phil smiled, even though his mouth was hidden by his mask. "Many times," he said pleasantly. "We're just waiting our turn." The voice modulator in the mask dropped his voice by several octaves, and with any luck, this Fosh wouldn't even think he was human.

The Fosh inclined their head slightly. "Then I wish you luck. Perhaps you'll receive the fortune you're seeking."

As the Fosh slipped past them and disappeared out the door, something rippled. Phil wasn't sure if it was a lingering breeze from outside or the Force itself, but he turned and watched the front door close.

"I think you might have been a little off there, Techno," Phil muttered. "There was something different about 'em."

Techno's eyes were fixed on the window, where they could see the Fosh crossing the street. "Perhaps."

"Come in."

Phil turned back around and found the door to August's inner chamber open. He drew his shoulders back, exhaled deeply, then strode inside.

The inner chamber felt otherworldly. The floor was a deep, royal purple, and it felt as unstable as solidified quicksand. Still more trinkets littered the walls, and runes and hexes from a million different cultures were painted across the ceiling. In the center of the room, a low, circular table was surrounded by plush pillows. August herself sat on the far side of the table.

"Green and red," she greeted warmly. August's smile turned curious, and she tipped her head to the side. "Or, perhaps... red and green. I cannot tell you apart as easily as I could before."

Outwardly, Techno's expression didn't change. But internally, guilt flew across their bond, quickly followed by a feeble attempt to cover it up. Phil sent a touch of comfort to calm his partner's raging mind. He wished he could do more, but they had to talk after this meeting.

"It's good to see you, August," Phil said cordially. "You're looking well."

August chuckled. "I wouldn't know. Please, sit."

Phil and Techno did. As they settled in, Phil took a moment to examine August. Upon their last visit, August had been down with flu. Now, she seemed herself. Her shock of white hair flopped over her face, and her tawny skin had cleared of any ill effects. It was once again impossible to tell if August was 22 or 1,000. Knowing the tenacity of Miraluka and August's propensity for the Force, there was a real possibility that she'd been alive for thousands of years.

Once Phil and Techno had found comfortable positions on the cushy pillows, August looked between them with evident interest.

"Looked" wasn't quite the right word. The red cloth wrapped around August's eyes was somewhat see-through, and Phil could make out the ridges of empty eye sockets. The sight would have been disturbing, had not he seen it many times before.

"What has brought you here today?" August asked after a long moment of silence. "It has been some time since you last entered my abode. I was beginning to worry that you had died."

Phil rested his hands against the tabletop. "We're not dead," he said quietly. "A friend of ours has a

problem. He's been through a lot, and he can't seem to shake the nightmares he's got from it. But we're not sure if they're just nightmares.”

A thin, white eyebrow raised. “Oh?”

Phil glanced at Techno, who sat forward with clear reluctance.

“There's some kind of echo in his room,” the pig Jedi began slowly. “It feels like someone should be in there, but it's always empty. Then the echo disappears, and I can't hold onto the feeling. It's... slippery.”

August hummed lightly. Her fingers drummed against the table, and the beat instantly made a headache blossom in Phil's temples. *She's doing it already*, he thought, barely concealing a pained wince.

*I know.*

*How are you holding up?*

*Better than you.*

Phil allowed himself to slump against Techno's shoulder, and the pig Jedi put a gentle hand on his back. The light touch eased the repetitive pounding in Phil's head.

Finally, August picked her fingers up with a curious hum. “Show me,” she ordered.

The Miraluka held out her hands expectantly, palms up. Techno's hesitation shone brightly through their bond, and the pig Jedi's fingers curled in on themselves. His partner's discomfort sparked an instinctive response. Without any conscious thought, Phil placed his right hand over August's and wrapped Techno's left hand with his own.

It worked as soon as contact was established. Phil's head was flooded with emotions and memories that weren't his own. He hissed, bringing up every mental shield that he had the strength to hold. Techno appeared beside him after a few painful moments, adding his power to the shields.

*Thank you*, Phil thought, inhaling deeply.

*Yeah. Now I can actually hear myself think.*

A silent chuckle passed through their bond, and Phil rolled his eyes fondly. But before he could respond, his attention was caught by August.

The Miraluka glowed brilliantly. Orange power flowed around her like lava, devastating in nature and omnipotent in presence. Logically, Phil knew that he looked just as bright to August. However, that didn't make seeing her Force presence up close any less nerve-wracking. It felt like he was staring at the sun.

Finally, the wave of raw Force power receded. Phil allowed his shoulders to slump, and beside him, Techno huffed a quiet breath. The pig Jedi was visibly winded from defending both of them.

“You have a very complex situation on your hands,” August murmured. If she was aware of how tired Phil and Techno were, she made no mention of it. “It is fascinating. These echoes are so strong, and yet... they do not linger. Tell me, does the boy experiencing these echoes have any bonds?”

Phil almost smiled. “One. His mentor.”

August' brow creased. “Just one? No, you showed me more than that, red one. There is another, is there not? Not as you two are bonded, but... someone else...”

Phil glanced at Techno, and the pig Jedi returned the frown. Who else was there? Dream was the only one with a bond to Tubbo. Unless...

“His best friend?” Techno suggested hesitantly.

August' frown cleared, and she nodded slowly. “Yes,” she murmured. “Two. A mentor and a friend. The boy sends his emotions to both, though I doubt he realizes it. Do you think one of these two is causing the echoes?”

Techno immediately shook his head. “No. I was with his friend when I felt the echoes, and his mentor cares about him too much. And their Force presences don't match.”

“Hmm...” August again beat her fingers on the edge of the table. Phil closed his eyes, trying to chase away the returning headache. “What about you, green one? Do you agree with your partner's assessment of these people?”

Phil had to swallow a wave of nausea before he could form any words. “Yes,” he rasped. August' drumming was spiking his heartbeat. “I do.”

August said nothing, only continuing to drum her fingers. The pounding in Phil's head was nearing unbearable levels, and silently, he prayed to the gods that he wouldn't pass out in the shop. It would be impossible for Techno to get him back to the Temple without attracting attention.

Then it was gone. A wave of strength flooded Phil's mind, washing away August' primal rhythm like seashells on the beach. Phil sighed, relieved, and started to thank Techno for the assistance.

But the power hadn't come from Techno.

The strength that had revitalized Phil's shields was his own. And yet... it also wasn't. Foreign power had driven the wave. It wasn't his, nor was he capable of controlling it – at least, not yet.

Phil smiled wanly. He *really* had to have that conversation with Techno.

Finally, August ceased her drumming. “You are Jedi,” she said plainly. Fear punched through Phil's chest like a plank of wood to the sternum, but August lifted a graceful hand. “Do not ask how I know this,” she said warmly. “Nor should you worry. I acknowledge you as my brethren, and you have been nothing but courteous since your first visit to my shop. So, as payment for helping me these past few years, I will now speak my piece on this matter.”

The Miraluka paused, and she pointed a slender finger at Techno. The pig Jedi recoiled.

“However,” August continued quietly. “This will be the last time that we speak. Many people have asked me about Jedi as of late, and I do not wish to lie more than once. Be cautious and watch your steps. Especially you, red Jedi. There is a mark on your soul that will catch up to you.”

The pig Jedi's muscles tensed, and panic streamed through their bond.

Techno was about two seconds from fleeing.

Phil quickly slipped his right hand under the table, yanked his glove off, and interlaced his fingers

with Techno's. Slowly, the wild edge faded from the pig Jedi's eyes. But, as the many emotions swirling through their bond indicated, Techno still wanted to leave as soon as etiquette allowed.

Phil did as well. August's knowledge of their identities had elevated his heart rate to unhealthy levels, and on top of that, it seemed that they had a target on their heads. They had to get out of the black market district.

August suddenly leaned forward, and her many necklaces jangled together. "Are you ready to hear what I think?" she asked. "Our time is running short, and I will only speak once."

Phil inclined his head. "Yes."

"Good."

August sat back. She waved a hand over the crystal ball sitting in the center of the table. Green mist began to swirl around the previous empty ball, and Phil stared, dumbfounded, as a distinct Force presence pulsed to life. He'd always been sure that the crystal ball was only for show. But no, August had somehow gotten her hands on a real diviner's eye.

"Someone has cast a shadow over your padawan friend's mind," August said softly. "You have asked questions such as, 'what could cause this?' and 'what nightmare would distress him so?' But you have not considered that the source of his pain is not a 'what,' but a 'who.' This padawan's tormentor is a Force wielder. I cannot speak as to who it may be or why they are doing such things. But I know that they practice a form of Force projection known to very few. It is synonymous to what Force-blinds would call magic."

Bad flashed through Phil's mind for a fraction of a second, but he banished the thought before it even fully formed. The loving daemon would *never* do something like this.

"This person is also a skilled shielder," August continued, and the mist inside the diviner's eye twisted into tight coils. "Especially if they have evaded your notice for so long. Or, perhaps, they know another way. There was a man who came into my shop years ago, speaking of things I'd never known were possible. Do you know of Kan Bo Salem?"

Phil chuckled humorlessly. "Oh, yes, we know him," he muttered. "He made quite the impact before he left."

August tipped her head to the side. "So you know of the methods he practices. I would assume that is what your tormentor is using. Between their knowledge of the Force and their skill, you must not underestimate them. You have a very cunning Force wielder in your midst."

*A very cunning traitor*, Phil thought bitterly. He sighed, unable to contain his exhaustion, then focused on August again. "Is that everything?" he asked wearily.

"Yes." August swept a hand over the diviner's eye, and the green mist of Tubbo's Force presence vanished. "It was a pleasure to have met you, Master Jedi," she said softly. The corners of her mouth quirked in a smile. "Perhaps one day, you shall return and speak to me as who you are. I would like to know about the Temple and the Order. I would like to meet this child you are seeking help for, as well as his friend and mentor. I believe there are many stories you have never told me."

Phil smiled warmly. "I wish you the best, August," he said. He held out a hand, and the Miraluka shook it firmly. "We'll come back when we don't have bounties on our heads."

August's smile widened a little. "Yes. I would like that."

Phil clambered to his feet, and his left shoulder groaned in protest. He hadn't stretched as much as the doctors had suggested, and now, he was paying the price. Phil left August's inner chamber, rolling his shoulder. He made it all the way to the front door before he realized that he was missing his six-foot shadow and paused.

Techno still stood in the inner chamber. The pig Jedi spoke to August quietly enough that Phil couldn't make out what they were saying. As Phil watched, August nodded and held out a hand. Techno shook the offered hand, then left the inner chamber, closing the door behind him.

"What was that about?" Phil asked slowly as Techno strode up to him. "You've never shaken her hand before."

Techno met his gaze for just a moment before looking away. Guilt thrummed through their bond, steady and crippling. "Just needed to ask her a question," the pig Jedi muttered. "I'll explain later."

Phil wanted to stop and have a conversation, but there were too many ears and eyes around. So, he reluctantly followed Techno back into the crowds.

In the dim nightlight, Phil and Techno looked no different from the hundreds of black market vendors, traders, and buyers wandering around. They strode down the street unbothered and unopposed.

To avoid suspicion, Phil and Techno had been forced to park their speeder a good 45 minutes away and walk to August's shop. If that first trip was a reliable measure, it would take them another hour to get back to the speeder. Phil didn't like being stuck out in the black market for so long. But their safety was more important than accessibility or ease.

Why had the doctors even ordered Phil to take it easy on his legs? It wasn't as if they'd been replaced, too.

Phil suddenly tripped over his own feet, and without Techno's incredible reflexes, he would have face-planted into the concrete. "Ah," Phil muttered aloud. "That's why."

Techno's only response was a snort.

The next half an hour passed in uneventful bliss. Phil's legs trembled, and his shoulder ached, but they were unimpeded in their journey. Phil distracted himself from his body's agony by reaching out with the Force, touching the minds of every person he could reach. To Phil's amazement, he went undetected. He heard thoughts as if their owners were speaking, and no one so much as looked around.

Phil had never been good at reading minds.

*Another item to add to the list,* Phil thought, and he wasn't sure if he was worried or excited. *So I was right. I shouldn't be able to-*

A warning exploded to life in Phil's head. He stumbled to a stop, and Techno, who had been trailing him by a few steps, crashed into him with a grunt. Phil tried to apologize, but his mental klaxons wailed too loudly to allow any room for speech.

"What, Phil?" Techno asked, clearly annoyed. Phil couldn't respond. "Phil?" This time, a hint of worry was present in the pig Jedi's voice, and Techno grabbed Phil's arm. "Phil, what's wrong? Are you okay?"

His power of speech returned in a rush, and Phil burst out, "Someone's chasing us!"

Techno frowned. “What?”

Phil desperately sorted through the chaos in his head before he spoke again. “Someone is chasing us,” he repeated. “I don’t... I don’t know how I know, but I’m absolutely sure of it. There’s at least three of them, and... I can’t explain how I know. But they are *not* good news.”

Techno looked around. They’d ducked down an alleyway to avoid a confrontation between an angry vendor and their customer, and the cracked street was abandoned – except for them.

“I can’t feel anything,” Techno said slowly. “Are you sure?”

Phil nodded. “Yes.”

The pig Jedi grabbed Phil’s arm and took off without another word of protest. “I saw an abandoned building down the street,” Techno explained. “We can hide in there.”

The two of them tumbled into the crowd on the other side of the alley and continued their hurried pace. The alarm bells in Phil’s head wailed louder and louder. The wave of strength that had saved him earlier didn’t seem forthcoming, so Phil clenched his jaw and let Techno guide him. Gods, his eyes were failing him. He could barely make out Techno’s outline.

*DANGER*, Phil’s mind screamed. *RUN!*

*If we run, we’ll spook all the trigger-happy idiots*, Phil argued back, and though he was talking to himself, it felt like he was fighting with someone else. *The last thing we need is to bring attention to ourselves. We just have to-*

Something pushed the back of the crowd. Like a stone being dropped in the pond, the ripples shoved Phil forward. Techno’s hand disappeared from his wrist, and before Phil could even inhale to shout, his body gave out.

Phil collapsed. His mind lit on fire, burning with the ferocity of a miniature sun and driving agony into every corner of his brain. *I have to move*, Phil thought. He barely managed to string the thought together without screaming. *I have to move, or I’ll be crushed. Techno... Techno will find me.*

With a monumental effort, Phil shambled to the side of the street. He crashed through the nearest door and crumpled to the floor, ripping his mask off as he went. Gods, he *couldn’t breathe*. Someone was probably going to shout at him for breaking the door, too.

Several seconds later, nothing had happened. Despite the horrific pain in his head, Phil pried his eyes open.

He was lying on the floor of a darkened building. The room was barren except for a threadbare carpet tossed nearby, a couch tipped on its back, and a staircase that led up to a second level.

*Carpet*, Phil thought desperately. His body was freezing cold, and without heat, he would quickly become immobile. Phil dug his elbow into the rickety floorboards and hauled himself forward. Three pulls got him close enough, and Phil grabbed the carpet with a frantic hand, wrapping it around his shoulders.

While his body froze, Phil’s mind was burning to ashes. People and places he didn’t recognize melted into his own memories, and conversations appeared, only to be dashed away a moment later. The only constant was one pounding, insistent thought: *It’s not me.*

What Phil wasn't, he didn't know. He'd lost the ability to see, and his body shivered like he was buried in ice. He was dying in his own skin.

A memory popped into his head. It stayed longer than the others, and Phil hesitantly recalled what it had felt like to be attacked by the assassins in black cloth. The dart struck his neck, and the memory ended. *That started all of this, didn't it?* Phil thought absently. *That dart got the ball rolling.*

No, wait, why was he so calm about the hell his mind was going through? Gods, it felt like he'd been split in two – a frantic side that was trying to figure out what the fuck was going on, and a passive, almost fearful side who was content to view life as it passed by, which included dying on the floor of an abandoned building.

Suddenly, the fire cleared. Phil was again alert and aware. In that moment of clarity, a choice appeared to him.

*Do you reject this?*

*Reject what?* Phil wondered. He wasn't even sure who (or what) was asking him the question.

Then a small stream of fire reentered his mind. This time, Phil realized that it wasn't burning his physical mind – it was burning his Force presence. The fire licked at it gleefully, threatening to reduce him to ash and dust if he let it in.

But... the fire wasn't saying anything, not really. Phil was just afraid of it.

*Why am I afraid of it?*

*It's different.*

*No. It's not.*

The fire wasn't foreign at all, nor were the memories it had brought. Phil stood next to the fire every single day, and over the years, he'd calmed it from a raging inferno to a warm campfire. The fire was his best friend.

*But it's different, Phil's mind protested. We will get hurt.*

The protests were weak, and already, the fire's threat was fading away. Phil could see it for what it was – the gift that had given him life.

*It will burn us, Phil's mind protested again.*

*No, it won't, Phil thought, and he accepted it.*

The floodgates opened. Fire poured through Phil's body, burning away the numb and cold and filling him with life. Phil surged to his feet with a gasp. All of his strength returned, and he stumbled a few steps from the raw energy in his veins. Finally, the fire dissolved into his bones. It still glowed fiercely, but it was no longer a physical ailment. It was pure Force power.

The fire had always been Force power.

Phil flexed his fingers experimentally and raised his eyebrows when they responded with exceptional dexterity. "I guess my mobility issues are solved," he muttered aloud. Another test with his legs confirmed that all the slowness and numbness he'd been experiencing was gone.

The fire burbled happily, and Phil smiled to himself. Enough avoidance. He and Techno had to talk.

Phil strode to the door and peered outside. Whatever commotion had caused him to stumble was gone. The crowds flowed steadily. In fact, it was surprisingly peaceful.

So why was Techno nowhere to be found?

Fear crept into Phil's chest. He reached for Techno through their bond, then realized with a jolt that he'd accidentally closed himself off. Phil frantically reopened the bond and was instantly flooded by emotions, everything from anger to agony. Techno's presence lit up like a beacon. The pig Jedi was ten streets away.

Phil started running before he'd even pinpointed Techno's location.

He threw caution to the wind as he tore through the streets. Phil launched himself over booths and dodged around every person that was moving slower than an all-out sprint. A few people threw him dirty looks. Phil couldn't have cared less.

Their bond pulsed with constant pain. Almost all of Techno's other thoughts and emotions were gone, overwhelmed by the agony that seared through the pig Jedi's conscious mind.

Seven streets. Five.

Phil emerged into a completely deserted section of the black market. Without anyone to impede his progress, he ran even faster.

Three. Two.

Phil flew around a corner and stopped dead in his tracks.

Techno was pressed against the wall of a dead-end, surrounded by Zabraks. Two were dead on the floor, and the seven still on their feet looked like they were itching for Techno's blood. And... they were close to getting it. A clear knife was jammed into the left side of Techno's gut, with cracks spidering down the blade.

Something boiled to life in the depths of Phil's very soul. It was an emotion that he'd thought he'd trained out of himself years ago, and yet, somehow, it grew to a roar.

Rage.

Phil drew his lightsaber, and the sight of crackled cobblestone bathed in emerald light brought him a sick sense of satisfaction. The Zabraks would never know what hit them.

A few of the Zabraks looked up. One's eyes widened to comical size, and another stepped away from Techno's writhing form.

"A Jedi?" one of them asked nervously. "I thought these guys were crooked embezzlers."

The biggest of the group (and the one holding the shikkar in Techno's stomach) grinned broadly. "Don't worry," he chuckled. "Their Code doesn't let them kill. Take him out."

Three of the Zabraks detached from the main party and advanced on Phil. An instinctive sneer curled his lips, and Phil reached out, grabbed a blue-skinned Zabrak by the neck. She flew towards him a strangled shout. Phil held her in the air, and fury tightened his grip.



“You have some balls going after Techno like this,” Phil snarled. “You're going to pay for that.”

The Zabrak coughed, clawing at the invisible hand around her neck. “Please,” she croaked. “I'm just trying to get home. This is my last job.”

Phil inhaled to say that she'd never see her family again.

Then his world shattered.

What was he doing? *What was the fuck was he doing?!*

Phil dropped the Zabrak with a mortified gasp. She collapsed to all fours, heaving horrible, wet coughs as she refilled her lungs. The other two Zabraks stumbled to a stop, and both stood almost 20 feet away.

*What did I just do?* Phil thought frantically. His head spun, and nausea twisted his stomach into terrible knots. *I just... I just tried to kill that woman. I didn't... I...*

The fire in Phil's mind flared. It was neither pleased nor disgusted at what he'd just done; it merely reminded him that it was there to be used if he wished.

With a sinking feeling, Phil understood.

Never in his life had Phil been able to surpass his limits, despite all the training he underwent. Eventually, he'd learned to accept what he'd been given, but now... he'd been handed more power than ever before. In the face of such instinctive and primal emotions, the Force had responded in kind.

Phil had almost tipped to the Dark Side.

Techno's scream pierced through Phil's horrified introspection. The blade in Techno's abdomen was almost broken.

The two standing Zabraks had helped the third to her feet and were staring at Phil with wide eyes.

Phil waved towards the black market. “Go,” he whispered. “I don't want to fight you.”

The three fled without hesitation.

Phil advanced on the remaining four. Two immediately turned and growled, racing at him with transparent daggers in hand. Phil disarmed both with a single Force grab, then shoved them apart. They crashed into opposite walls of the alley and collapsed with heaving chests. Phil plucked the third Zabrak from beside his leader and tossed him over the west-side building. Finally, Phil approached the leader.

The beefy Zabrak turned, and a self-satisfied, toothy grin split his face. “You're just a Jedi,” he chuckled. “This one didn't even try to kill my men, and he seems a whole lot meaner than you, old man.”

Phil leveled his lightsaber at the tall, tan Zabrak. “Get the fuck away from him,” he warned quietly. “I'll only say it once.”

The Zabrak sneered, and his arm flexed to shatter the blade.

Phil grabbed the back of the leader's jacket and hurled him down the alley. The Zabrak flew away with a lusty howl that cut off abruptly once he crashed into an abandoned stall.

No one dead. The way it should be.

“Phil...”

Without the leading Zabrak's pinning hand, Techno was slowly sliding down the wall. Phil lunged forward and caught the pig Jedi under the arms, carefully lowering his partner to the ground. The shikkar still stuck out of Techno's left side, dripping blood.

“How bad is it?” Phil asked worriedly.

Techno coughed once, then met Phil's gaze with surprisingly alert eyes. “It's not as bad as you'd think,” the pig Jedi said absently. Phil blinked, unnerved by the nonchalant reply, and Techno smiled faintly. “I might have been playing it up a little. I thought they'd draw it out if they thought I was in agony, and I was right. I don't think they even punctured my stomach.”

Phil was at a loss for words. For a long moment, he just stared at his partner, who was all smiles. Finally, Phil shook his head. “You really fucking scared me,” he muttered. “Gods, Techno, I thought you were dying. I'm glad you're not, but Holy Kantos.”

Techno's smile dimmed. “I mean... the big guy could have killed me. But his friends didn't seem the smartest bunch. Those two over there killed each other because they got into an argument over a knife.”

The knife in question jutted out of one of the Zabrak's chest. The other had blood pooled around his head.

Phil grimaced at the sight and quickly turned back to Techno. “It's a good-looking knife,” he admitted. “It's a shame that it had to go to waste like that.”

Techno raised an eyebrow. “That's what you think? Two people are dead, and your first thought is 'oh, that's a nice knife?'”

Phil grinned at the mockery, but his amusement quickly faded. He was avoiding the real issues. One, the shikkar still stuck in Techno's stomach. And two... his horrifying performance with the three Zabraks.

One issue at a time.

“I can't take it out,” Phil muttered, gesturing vaguely at the shikkar. “I don't have a droid's touch. And there's no way in hell that I'm flying you back; our speeder would shatter that thing as soon as you sat down.”

Techno shifted slightly, which gave Phil a minor heart attack, then held up a smushed piece of tech.

“I'd call for help, but one of these idiots crushed my earpiece,” Techno said flatly. “I don't think they even noticed. Did you bring yours?”

Phil fished around in his jacket's hidden pocket and was relieved to find his earpiece sitting inside. “Of course I did,” he said, popping it into his ear and ignoring Techno's amused snort. “Call Wilbur.” The earpiece beeped, hummed, then began buzzing. Wilbur picked up on the first ring. “Hey, Will. I need you to send an ambulance to, uh...” Phil glanced up and found a dilapidated sign hanging above them. “The old Kuren district. It's right next to the black market, so tell them to be sneaky.”

*“Why the fuck am I sending an ambulance out there? What the fuck happened?”*

“Just do it, Will.”

The call disconnected, presumably as Wilbur called the infirmary, and Phil removed his earpiece. Techno was already staring at him.

There was the second issue.

“I suppose you were conscious enough to see me do...” Phil exhaled deeply and waved over his shoulder. “That,” he completed weakly.

Techno nodded once. “Yeah.”

Their bond was strained. They were both holding back, afraid of the other.

Phil refused to back down from this, not after all the shit they'd taken over the years.

“I'm so, so sorry, Techno,” Phil murmured. Techno frowned and opened his mouth, but Phil held up a hand. “No, let me finish. That was... horrible. I didn't even recognize myself, and I wish I could've stopped myself from thinking of... killing someone like that. I'm sorry. I'm sorry you have to feel my guilt now.”

Phil took down his mental shields and let Techno feel the turmoil roiling in his mind, the guilt, the shame, and the doubt. Techno stared at him for a long, silent moment.

Finally, the pig Jedi did the same. Their emotions mirrored each other perfectly.

“It's not your fault,” Techno said quietly. “I did that to you.” The pig Jedi's eyes fell to the floor, clouded with pain. “I was selfish and desperate. I didn't know what it'd do to you. The doctors tried to stop me, but I didn't listen.”

Phil smiled faintly at the thought of Techno arguing with a bunch of doctors. “But you saved my life,” he noted. “You know as well as I do that I wouldn't be alive if it wasn't for you.” Phil gently tapped Techno's left arm. Slowly, the pig Jedi rolled up the sleeves of his tunic, revealing a thin scar lined by a deep, black-and-purple bruise. “How many hours did you sit there?”

Techno laughed humorlessly. “So many. They had to kick me out a few times since I would pass out if I stayed. I broke the rule one time, actually. I thought the doctor was going to kill me.

“Gods, Techno...”

“It worked.”

Despite the guilt and shame that rolled off of Techno like steam, there was steel in his eyes. The pig Jedi would do it again in a heartbeat.

And Phil would have done the same.

“Well, we have a couple of minutes until the ambulance shows up,” Phil mused, and he settled himself onto the grimy stone next to Techno. “And I don't want you to start fiddling with that knife in your gut. So, how'd it work?”

Techno rolled his eyes but began talking. “It was simple enough. I mean, I thought so. The poison was getting to your brain faster than your body could heal, especially since the point of injection was your shoulder. A couple of days after the attack, the doctors expected you to die in the night.

And I...”

The pig Jedi's eyes dropped to Phil's durasteel hand, and Phil absently flexed his fingers. “You couldn't live with that,” he murmured.

“No,” Techno agreed. “So I told them to use my blood for a transfusion. They told me why it wouldn't work, but I wouldn't leave until they tried. In their eyes, you were already a dead man, and what's the harm in giving a dead man one transfusion, y'know? So they replaced your blood with mine.”

Phil couldn't contain his curiosity and reached out. At Techno's nod, he felt along the thin scar. Even though it was just one ridge of many on Techno's marred skin, Phil could feel the prominent agony behind this one. He could feel the traces of misery that had been etched into Techno's soul after hours of endless waiting.

“Clearly, I didn't die,” Phil said, and that earned a small laugh from Techno. “Were they surprised?”

“Oh, yeah,” Techno chuckled. “They waited with me all night because they wanted to call the time of death. When the sun rose, you were still alive. And you didn't look as pale.”

Techno fell silent, and Phil imagined the scene. Techno, standing over his bed, watching all night for the seemingly inevitable flatline. Sudden tears pricked at his eyes. Phil cleared his throat and asked, “How long?” His voice was scratchy, and he quickly cleared his throat again. “How long did you keep doing that? I know I got more than one transfusion.”

Techno smiled tiredly. “I couldn't even tell you how many days it was. They all blurred together. At your worst, I think I gave you five transfusions in one day.”

“In Tibulta's name,” Phil muttered. Techno chuckled again, and Phil turned a half-hearted glare on his partner. “That one isn't fucking funny, Techno. It's a miracle you didn't die from giving that much blood.”

“I almost did,” Techno said simply.

Phil couldn't find the words to respond to that.

“It was worth it to save you.”

Phil glanced up. Techno's eyes were soft, crinkled at the corners by a fond smile.

“But I think you got some unexpected side effects,” the pig Jedi noted. “That was... quite a show.”

“Quite a show,” indeed. Phil could feel the fire burning in the back of his mind, humming contentedly at being used. “You have a hell of a gift, Techno,” Phil sighed. “I only got a fraction of it, and I went insane for like, ten minutes. I don't know how you deal with it 24/7.”

Techno cracked a small grin. “It's not that bad,” he said lightly. “You get used to it after a while.” The pig Jedi's grin twisted into a frown. “Wait, did you say you went crazy? What happened?”

Phil projected the memory through their bond, and Techno's face paled by several shades.

That had been the first sign that something was different. From the moment Phil had woken up, their bond had been stronger.

“Are you sure that the doctors didn't warn you about this?” Phil asked, hopefully. “I'd love to have a medical professional explain to me why the fuck you giving me blood also transferred some of your Force power. Does it have something to do with midichlorians or some shit?”

Techno snorted. “Phil, no one knows how midichlorians work. No, they didn't warn me.”

They lapsed into silence. Phil let his eyes close as he listened to Techno's emotions through their bond. It was a soothing balm over the aches and pains that his body was starting to develop. *Looks like I'm going through burnout again*, Phil thought dryly. *Damn. I'm basically a padawan. Tommy is going to have a field day with this one.*

“Oh, by the way.”

Phil glanced over and found Techno looking down at the shikkar sticking out of his bloodied tunic.

“This isn't as bad as we thought it was,” Techno continued conversationally, running his finger over the blade. “Rhodys did some digging. It turns out that an Underworld merchant got his hands on ancient Keshiri texts and has been making these ever since. They're not Force-crafted or anything, but they work. It's probably why this one hasn't shattered yet.”

Phil exhaled deeply, and some of the weight on his shoulders slipped away. “So we can scratch Sith off our list of worries,” he mumbled. “Good.”

Their conversation faded again, and sudden exhaustion engulfed Phil like a blanket. He slumped against Techno, which earned a quiet chuckle from his partner.

“Burnout?” the pig Jedi asked, far too cheerfully for Phil's tastes.

“Yeah,” Phil grumbled. “I already told you, Techno, you've got a hell of a talent. I'd be honored to wield part of it if I wasn't so fucking drained.” He rubbed his eyes with the palm of his hand. “I swear to the gods... you're going to have to help me relearn how to do everything related to the Force, you know that? Literally fucking everything. It's a miracle I didn't accidentally pull a building over.”

Techno chuckled lightly. “I think I can manage that.”

The gentle amusement shining through their bond was more than worth Phil's discomfort.

Ten minutes later, the ambulance showed up. Wilbur burst out of the vehicle before it stopped moving, and Phil barely had time to get to his feet before the taller man grabbed him by the shoulders.

“You just got back on your feet, and *this* is what you do?” Wilbur demanded. Phil opened his mouth to point out that this incident hadn't been his fault, but Wilbur rushed over him. “Fucking hell, Phil, you didn't even send me a proper message! It was, like, two sentences!”

Phil had actually sent Wilbur a very long message, going into great detail about why he and Techno were leaving and what they hoped to accomplished. But Wilbur was probably too worried to remember that.

For a long moment, Wilbur was silent. Then the Jedi Master's dark eyes shifted to Techno, who was being lifted by the medics, and he slumped.

“You need to stop getting fucking hurt,” Wilbur muttered. “I can't help you out here.”

Phil gently tugged Wilbur's wrists, and the taller man collapsed against him. Phil cradled his lanky armful as best he could. "I know, Will," he said softly. "I'm sorry that you had to come out here. Are you okay?"

"No," Wilbur mumbled into Phil's shoulder. "I'm very fucking upset with you. And I had to leave Tommy with Sappap, so now I owe him a favor, and Sappap is terrible with favors. Everything about this situation is terrible."

Something about Wilbur's short rant reminded Phil of Tommy, and he chuckled quietly at the comparison. But, for Wilbur's sake, he kept the thought to himself.

Finally, Wilbur released Phil from his tight hug. "Thank the gods you were here," Wilbur whispered. The taller man sniffled slightly, and tiny tears glimmered in the corners of his eyes. He looked genuinely exhausted. "Techno would have died without you."

Phil blinked, stunned by the simple phrase. But then the medics called for them to leave, and he and Wilbur had to hop into the ambulance. Due to the nature of Techno's injury, Phil and Wilbur were forced to sit in the ambulance's cab with the other medics.

*Techno would have died without you.*

For the entire duration of their partnership, Phil had felt guilty about their lifestyle. He and Techno moved from job to job, tackling missions and mobs that the rest of the Order wouldn't dare to touch. They lived on a knife's edge, and with every assignment, Phil prayed that they'd make it back to the Temple in one piece.

But maybe things weren't as bleak as that. Maybe... he and Techno were each other's saving grace.

Phil glanced into the back of the ambulance. Techno's eyes were closed, and the medics at his side carefully stabilized the shikkar in his stomach. Their bond hummed with peace. Techno finally rested without fear.

*Techno would have died without you.*

Phil pressed a hand against the partition window.

Living to save someone else's life was well worth it.

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Nick chewed his thumbnail as he gazed into the room. Tubbo was curled up on his side, knees tucked against his chest. The many wires sticking out of the boy's arms were taut from the awkward position, but Nick made no move to shift the padawan. Gods knew that Tubbo needed sleep.

A flash of a headache passed behind Nick's eyes, and he growled under his breath, pressing his fingers into his eye sockets. Nick would love to take a nap, but he had too much to do. He would have already gotten most of it done if this *gods-damned headache would just go away*-

Something crashed behind him, and Nick whirled around, hand halfway to his lightsaber and his heart in his throat. A young Falleen nurse stared back at him with a mortified expression. The contents of the nurse's cart were scattered across the floor.

"I'm so sorry," the nurse stuttered. His hands fluttered helplessly for a moment before he began gathering up a pile of clothes. "I didn't mean to get in your way. I just to have to get in the next

room down.” The nurse's eyes landed on Nick's cheeks, and his already pale face turned a sickly lime.

Nick smiled wanly. This nurse was probably the same age as him, if not a few years older. “Don't worry about it,” he said gently. “Let me help.”

Nick crouched next to the Falleen and grabbed two heavy buckets of water. The nurse watched him warily, but as Nick loaded the cart without a word, his shoulders slowly relaxed.

“Thank you,” the Falleen murmured once the cart was repacked. “I'm very sorry to be a bother.”

“It was nothing,” Nick chuckled. “Really. I hope the patient you're taking this stuff to gets better.”

The nurse's face broke out in a warm smile. “She's on the mend,” he said fondly. “Talented little girl, only 8 years old. She fell out of a tree while trying to get her friend's kite, and now, she has to use crutches for a couple of months. It's lucky that the tree wasn't taller. But one of the Masters has already agreed to train her!”

Nick glanced into Tubbo's room. The padawan had flopped onto his back and was snoring lightly, one arm dangling over the edge of his bed. How wonderful it would be if Tubbo's only concern was a broken ankle.

“Yeah,” Nick sighed. “I'm glad she'll be okay.”

The nurse peered around Nick, and his face lit up. “Is that Padawan Tubbo?” the Falleen asked, still smiling.

Nick gave the nurse a hesitant look. “Yeah. Why?”

The Falleen chuckled lightly, and he began rummaging through his cart. “I was on duty when Padawan Tubbo used the 'call for help' button,” he explained. “No one realized what he'd done until five of us showed up at his room with a bunch of cakes, all at the same time. My manager was upset, but I thought it was wonderfully clever.”

The nurse made a triumphant noise and picked up a small, wrapped cake. He held it out to Nick, and Nick accepted it with a strange lump in his throat. “I believe Padawan Tubbo likes those,” the Falleen said. His smile was radiant. “Please give it to him when he wakes up.”

Nick swallowed thickly. It was just a cake. “Yeah, I will,” he managed, after a few more swallows. “Thank you. I'm sure he'll love it.”

The nurse nodded, still beaming, then pushed his cart down the hallway. Nick watched as the next door opened with a hiss, and the nurse was greeted with a young girl's cry of “Val!” The Falleen (Val, it seemed) disappeared into the room with a laugh.

Nick looked down at the cake in his hands. It had clearly been wrapped with careful hands, and Nick knew in his gut that Val had packaged the cakes himself.

Kindness really could be found anywhere.

Val's initial reaction had stung. Not just because Nick felt guilty, but also that the Falleen had been right. A couple of months ago, Nick probably would have rolled his eyes at the nurse and walked past without a second thought. Looking back on it... Nick now saw how shitty that mindset was. Being a Jedi didn't make him “superior.” The nurses arguably did more good than he did.

Who knew that living through life-changing trauma and the fucking disaster of the century would make him a better person?

Nick scoffed at himself, then headed back into Tubbo's room. The padawan was still asleep, now sprawled on his stomach, so Nick set the cake on Tubbo's bedside table. He had to go meet with Rhodys about a possible mission in his future. Hopefully, the padawan would notice the cake when he woke up.

“Hey. You on your way out?”

Nick looked up. Eret stood in the doorway, a small smile on his face.

“Just about,” Nick agreed. “Come on it. I can stay for a few more minutes.”

Eret did so, and the Jedi Master quickly settled himself into the other visitor's chair.

Nick still had his doubts. Even after the story that Eret had told the task force (which had been relayed to Nick afterward by Clay, George, and Bad), Nick wasn't sure if he trusted the Jedi Master. But their interaction with Delphina had swayed him closer to Eret's side.

As if he'd heard Nick's thoughts, Eret suddenly pulled a small data stick from his pocket.

“I dug up something on Delphian,” the Jedi Master said quietly. He held the data stick out to Nick. “Be careful where you watch this. It's security footage from the day that Delphina was spotted heading into the Underworld. There's also an interaction between her and Technoblade from the other day. You can draw your own conclusions.”

Nick gingerly accepted the data stick. “Why are you giving me this?” he asked slowly. “Shouldn't this be in the task force's capable hands?”

Eret's smile was weary. “You really think I'm going to turn this over to them *now*? Dream and George aren't here, Philza and Techno are out in the black market, and Wilbur just left to deal with some sort of emergency. Our pool of friends is rather thin. You're the safest bet. And I need another pair of eyes to look at this and find something that I haven't.”

On another day, Nick would have been pissed that he was Eret's last resort. Then again, he was lucky to even be on Eret's list of allies, given that Nick *wasn't on the task force*.

“Well, thanks,” Nick muttered. He shoved the data stick into his pocket and resolved to watch the footage after meeting with Rhodys. “Did Delphina talk to you at all?”

“No. You?”

Nick hesitated. While the answer was technically no, he'd passed Delphian a few times throughout the day. Every time, the Jedi Master had openly stared at him, venom practically dripping from her eyes. Nick had made up many excuses to explain his ridiculous detours.

“Kinda,” Nick said eventually. “She didn't actually talk to me, though. I think it's fine.”

Eret sighed, slumping into his seat. Nick had never talked to Eret one-on-one before, and it pained him to see the dark bags gouged beneath the Jedi Master's piercing eyes.

“Oh, there's something you should know,” Eret added quietly. “In the footage, there's some sort of code on Delphina's right hand. It's only visible for a couple of shots, and I don't know if it means anything. But there's no one here I can trust to analyze it. You wouldn't happen to be a budding



cryptographer, would you?"

Nick shook his head slightly. "No. But I'll see what I can make of it."

They both fell quiet. Eret's silver eyes swept over Tubbo's face with evident worry, and Nick almost chuckled. What a strange sight they must be, two Jedi watching a perfectly healthy padawan sleep. Had Nick not been tasked to protect Tubbo, he would have left, just to respect the padawan's privacy. Was his guard duty an intrusion of privacy? Gods, he didn't know anymore. Everything seemed so complicated.

His wrist communicator suddenly beeped. Nick jumped, startled, and checked the small screen. A message from Rhodys awaited him.

**Rhodys:** Sorry for the delay. I just finished my meeting with Cho-Nal, omw to the High Chambers. Are you already there?

Nick swore under his breath and quickly composed a response.

**Sapnap:** My apologies, I got held up. I'll be there in five minutes.

"I've gotta go," Nick grumbled, heaving himself to his feet. Eret watched his painful progress with an amused smile, and Nick suddenly had to repress the urge to punch the Jedi Master in the nose. "Are you gonna stay here?"

"For a while, yeah," Eret said. "I want to make sure Tubbo sleeps a bit more."

Nick inclined his head. "Thanks. I don't want him to be alone when he wakes up."

Eret didn't respond, so Nick began gathering up his things. He slipped into his robes, smoothed the wrinkles out of his pants, then headed for the door. If he hurried, he'd get to the Council Chambers in about six minutes. Hopefully, Rhodys would pardon the extra delay.

Just as Nick was about to leave, Eret muttered under his breath, "The hell is that?"

Nick froze. Something dangerous swirled in the air, and he glanced over his shoulder. "What'd you say?" he asked slowly.

Eret's piercing eyes flicked up to meet his. "There's... something in here," the Jedi Master said haltingly, brows furrowed. "I can feel it. I don't know where, exactly, but it's something. It's... it's cold. Come over here."

All thoughts of making it to his meeting with Rhodys abandoned Nick's mind. He strode over to Eret and pushed his mind to its limits. It was no secret that Nick was the least Force-sensitive out of his childhood trio (and that Eret's skill far outweighed his), but even *he* felt something in the air. Nick couldn't describe the feeling, yet he recognized it as if it were a friend.

"What is that?" Nick muttered.

Eret's eyes darted between things that Nick couldn't see. "It's Tubbo," Eret whispered. Horror spread across the Jedi Master's face like frost. "Oh, gods, wake Tubbo up now!"

Nick flew to the padawan's bedside and rolled Tubbo onto his back. Now that the boy's face was visible, it was clear that something was horribly wrong. Tubbo's mouth was stretched a silent scream. His eyes rolled wildly behind closed eyelids, and his body was entirely rigid.

“Tubbo, wake up,” Nick commanded. He shook Tubbo roughly. “C'mon, Tubbo, wake up. I'm not letting this happen to you again.”

With a drawn-out gasp, Tubbo's eyes flew open. The boy sat bolt upright, and his hands clawed at Nick's.

“Where am I?” Tubbo demanded, his voice cracking on the “I.” “Where'd you-” Tubbo trailed off mid-sentence as he noticed Nick standing beside him. The padawan's confused expression made Nick feel strangely nervous. “Sapnap. You're here. I thought... I thought you...”

Tubbo trailed off helplessly, and Nick's heart ached. “Hey, it's okay,” he said gently. He put a careful hand on Tubbo's shoulder, and, when he got no adverse reaction, squeezed lightly. “I'm fine. How are you feeling?”

“Bad,” Tubbo mumbled. “Really bad. I don't... I don't even feel like I slept. I just remember you... you....”

The padawan flopped back onto his bed, eyes fluttering closed with an exhausted sigh. Nick watched him silently, but his mind was racing. Tubbo having nightmares about Clay or Tommy or someone else made sense; he was close to them and obviously worried. But Nick? Nick liked the padawan a lot, but they weren't close enough to warrant nightmares. After all, he'd only been watching over Tubbo for a couple of days.

Nick shot Eret a look. If the Jedi Master's frown was any indication, Eret had the same concerns.

“Do you want to get some more sleep?” Nick asked softly.

Tubbo's expression was somewhere between desperate and terrified. “Yes. *Please*.”

“I'll get a doctor,” Eret suggested. The Jedi Master rose from his chair and strode towards the door. “They can probably get you a mild sedative, Tubbo. That might help you sleep.”

Tubbo nodded miserably. Eret left the room, and Nick was left with a despondent padawan. He didn't know how he could possibly help Tubbo, but he had to try.

Nick pulled up his conversation with Rhodys.

**Sapnap:** Tubbo just woke up. I have to stay with him.

For a moment, there was no response. Then:

**Rhodys:** That's fine. We can meet later tonight.

Nick smiled slightly, and he slid his wrist communicator into his pocket. It was nice to see that Rhodys had mellowed out over the years. He remembered the days when the Trandoshan Master would have made him run for hours for so much as suggesting that he had to miss a meeting.

Maybe Nick wasn't as much of an asshole anymore, either.

“Alright, Tubbo,” Nick said with as much cheer as he could muster. He sank into the seat next to Tubbo's bedside and couldn't help but think that it should have been Clay comforting the padawan. “We have a few minutes before Eret gets back. What were you telling me about that specialized bee farm?”

Tubbo's eyes lit up. “You still want to hear about that?” he asked hesitantly.

Nick grinned. "Hell, yeah. Bees are awesome."

The padawan was practically glowing. "Okay. Okay! So, after you get a bunch of bees together, you have to..." Tubbo trailed off suddenly, his eyes fixed on the small cake on the side table. "What's this?"

Nick had almost forgotten his promise. He plucked the cake from the table and held it out to Tubbo. "This is for you," he said warmly. "From a nurse that walked by. His name was Val, and he told me all about your antics with the 'call for help' button. That was genius, by the way, I wish I'd thought of it myself."

"This is from Val?" Tubbo asked, and his smile grew even broader. "Aw, that's so nice. I remember him. He seemed like a really cool guy."

Tubbo unwrapped the cake, ranting about bees as he went. Nick listened passively. He didn't really understand anything of what Tubbo said, but the light in the padawan's eyes made up for his confusion.

*He's too good of a kid to be going through this,* Nick thought, and his smile wavered. *He doesn't deserve to be stuck in here. He doesn't deserve any of this.*

For the first time, Nick understood what it meant to want to take someone else's burden.

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Clay shoveled down another spoonful of the delicious soup and sighed contentedly. Say what he would about the morals and ethics of the Underworld, but their cuisine was unmatched. In the span of a three-day trip, Clay had sampled dishes from galaxies that he'd never known existed. Frankly, the food was the Underworld's best feature.

*If only the area was a little nicer,* Clay thought absently. *They could have made a market out of this.*

As he had the thought, a nearby table of Kyuzo mercenaries began shouting in their native language, hurling tankards of green liquid at each other. The confrontation turned violent as two of the Kyuzo tackled another and plunged all seven into a dogpile. Clay took a sip of his drink and shifted away from the mess.

After three days, he was almost used to the hazardous nature of the Underworld. When someone pulled out a knife, Clay's first instinct was no longer to defend himself; it was merely to see where the knife was pointed. If it wasn't at him, then Clay moved along without a second thought. At first, he'd been appalled by the change in mindset. But, after a few hours of questioning his morality, Clay concluded that he wasn't a bad person if he let a murderer get shanked. Besides... heroism would blow their cover.

Clay was starting to understand why Zulek had been the only person that George had ever saved. How George had kept his humanity and heart intact for so long was beyond him. Four years and Clay might have become just like the rest of the street-roamers.

No matter. Clay hadn't had to endure such trials, and George was no longer stuck in the Underworld. The past wasn't a problem anymore.

Mostly.

Clay shook the darkness out of his head and went back to enjoying his soup. The spicy broth let a

pleasant tang on his tongue, and Clay wondered if he could convince George to buy a few more bowls to take back to the Temple.

A blindingly blue presence suddenly erupted at the edges of Clay's mind. Speak of the devil, there George was. The shorter man was winding his way through the food court, moving with catlike ease. Their eyes met across the mass of seething people. Clay grinned, and he was treated to George's dazzling smile. It felt *so* good to be able to really look at George again.

"How'd it go?" Clay asked softly once the engineer sank into the seat across from him.

George held up a thin card and waggled it with a satisfied smirk. "She didn't see a thing. It's good until tomorrow morning, so we have to get in and out tonight. You ready?"

Clay held up a finger, slurping up the last of his soup with the other hand. "Okay, I'm ready," he chirped. George rolled his eyes, but the motion was decidedly fond. "It's east from here, right?"

George eyed the empty bowl for a moment before he said anything. "Yeah," he muttered. "It's east. Gods, I would have thought you hadn't eaten in fucking days if I didn't have breakfast with you. Does your brain really need that many calories to run?"

Before Clay could defend himself, George rose from his chair and started off through the crowd. Clay sighed at the dramatics, but he followed the shorter man with quick strides. If he got lost, he'd never find his way to the trams.

The trams were a series of aboveground railways that ran through levels 2085 to 2090. They crossed through the levels using special pipes, and while Clay and George didn't plan to use the trams, they *were* interested in the pipes. All they had to do was sneak into an out-of-commission silo, and they had direct access to level 2087. However, they still needed to get into the tram station- hence, the card George had nicked from one of the more affluent patrons of level 2086.

After that, it was on to the Narezasha Casino. The Narezasha was their starting point for trying to find the elusive Night Thief. Clay and George hoped to get the jump on the delinquent before things started getting messy.

I.e., before the Night Thief noticed them and disappeared.

Clay drifted in and out of his thoughts as he trailed George through level 2087's winding streets. Everything seemed so dark and dreary, probably due to the weak fluorescent strips. The pale blue lights were incapable of fully illuminating the shadows. Unsavory characters moved just beyond visible sight, and something always seemed to be groaning. Basically, Clay was a nervous wreck.

*You okay?*

George's hand reached back towards Clay slightly as he projected the thought. Clay smiled at the gesture.

*I'm fine. I just don't like this level.*

*Me neither. Any headaches?*

Clay considered it. There was a dull throb in his temples, but it had been there since arriving in the Underworld. Since his confession a few hours earlier, he'd been able to block out most of the echoes and hotspots that decorated the Underworld like impressionist art.

*Not yet. There are a lot of hotspots and echoes around here, but none of them are recent.*

*That's a first.*

Clay chuckled aloud, and George's shoulders rose and fell in a silent laugh.

“Hey, you two! This is our turf!”

The shout broke Clay out of his good mood. He looked around with a scowl, and his gaze quickly landed on an advancing group of Houk. Gods, they didn't have time for this. He and George were already running out of time.

“Your turf?” George repeated incredulously. “This is a public street. My companion and I are on our way to the tram station.”

The leading Houk (who seemed even beefier than his fellows) sneered. “You should have taken another street,” he said with a slow chuckle. “We're going to pound you into pieces. The Red-Eyed Bastions don't-”

George moved before the Houk even finished his sentence. Clay followed the shorter man's lead and drew both of his swords, activating the “electro-blade” function as he went. The leading Houk fell beneath their combined electricity like a sack of potatoes.

Clay straightened and stared at the other three Houk. “Anyone else?” he asked.

The three Houk glanced at one another. Then all three of them waved for Clay and George to move on, which they did. Unsurprisingly, one of the Houk tried for a sneak attack, which Clay had to twist awkwardly to deflect. The Houk collapsed in a heap on the pavement.

“I think we made a few enemies,” Clay noted, falling into place at George's side. “We can't come back to this level now.”

George shrugged. “I never liked Houk gangs. They're always super loud, and their requests for modifications are stupid hard.”

Clay wanted to protest that they should be worried about a gang of Houk out to get them. But, now that he thought about it, George had probably alienated entire mobs during his tenure in the Underworld. One measly gang of Houk was nothing. Clay shut his mouth and followed George silently under the streetlights.

To Clay's great relief, they reached the tram station without any further incident. George swiped the stolen card across the reader, and they both slipped past the force field. Given that it was about 1 o'clock in the afternoon, the tram station was almost empty. But, as he and George strode towards the huge pipes, Clay noticed a guard disappear back into a hidden office.

Once they reached the silos, they snuck around to the back of an out-of-commission silo. Up close, the pipes were even larger than expected. They towered all the way up to the next level, and Clay could barely see the ceiling from where he stood. Maybe they hadn't thought their plan through all the way.

“Are you sure this is gonna work?” Clay asked quietly.

George nodded. “Yeah, I checked the blueprints myself. Go and find the door, and I'll get the rope.”

Clay nodded and started plodding around the pipe. Somewhere along the backside, there was a service door that would allow them access. As he searched, the shiny silver plating glinted back at

him.

*You gonna try to hurt me? You can't do shit!*

Clay finally found the door, and he drove one of his swords into the mechanical lock. The sickening “snick” of a blade slicing through flesh reached his ears, and Clay grimaced. Ah... so he was standing in an echo. That explained the voice. And the pounding in his head.

The lock clattered away within seconds. Clay pulled the door opened and stepped inside. Gigantic constructions of metal and wires made to support a tram rose through the pipe, just as they'd been told, but there was one significant difference.

“There's stairs,” Clay said blankly.

From outside, the sound of a rope being dropped suddenly paused. “What?”

“There's stairs. And ladders. They're just... there.”

Metal stairs ran up the opposite wall, occasionally morphing into a ladder that led up to the next set. Stairs and ladders switchbacked all the way up the pipe and disappeared beyond Clay's field of vision.

“Are they safe?”

Clay glanced over his shoulder and found George standing at the doorway, holding a half-undone coil of rope. “Looks like it,” he muttered. “I guess we don't have to scale this monster after all. You should probably keep that rope, though.”

George closed the door, and together, the two of them crossed the silo and began ascending the stairs. Clay led the way. He argued that he would have a better chance of catching himself if he fell, which was true. But in reality, Clay just wanted to keep George safe. If one of the stairs caved or a ladder rung gave out, Clay wanted to take the hit.

How noble of him. Because George wasn't perfectly capable of defending himself, as he'd done for years. Not at all.

Clay was just stuck in the past, wasn't he? He still wanted to keep George safe like he used to. But George didn't need his help. He hadn't for a long time.

Luckily for them, none of the horrible situations Clay had predicted came to pass. They reached the top of the stairs/ladders, cut through the lock on the door, and slipped into level 2087.

Compared to the doldrums of level 2086, 2087 was an explosion of light, life, and color. Beyond the tram station (which was extraordinarily clean and gilded in bronze), monolithic buildings made of neon and gold flashed on every corner. People glittered like jewels and gemstones, and the streets themselves were infused with some sort of silver powder.

“We're back on level 3714,” Clay said sullenly, and he scowled as someone's jewelry caught the light and nearly blinded him. “Fuck, it's even worse here. How the hell are some of these levels so extravagant? Where'd they get the money for all this?”

George was silent. The shorter man's face was screwed into a grimace, but his left hand was tight around his staff's handle. Finally, he muttered, “Let's make this quick. I want to get out of here before I go blind.”

Together, they started off into the crowd.

Echoes thrummed around them. Clay's toes tingled every time he took a step, reacting to the hotspots that dappled the ground. Just like on level 3714, the buildings whispered their sins. And, as a tall, thin humanoid strutted past, the darkness radiating off of him almost made Clay lose his footing. It seemed that the wealthiest levels of the Underworld were doomed to carry the most despicable secrets.

After a fruitless, five-minute search, Clay leaned closer to George. "Where's the Narezasha?" he whispered. "I thought the broker said it'd be right here."

"That's what she said," George sighed in reply. "But she doesn't have the best reputation. It was just the only lead I could find overnight. Apparently, people really like the Night Thief. No one seems to want to give him up."

The phrasing made Clay smile humorlessly. The most "well-liked" Underworld icons were the darkest of the bunch. "I guess we'll just have to find it ourselves."

As they wandered the streets, Clay was overwhelmed by *deja vu*. When they'd searched for Salem the previous day, they'd burned almost an hour trying to find the convention center. Now, they seemed to be doomed to the same fate.

But, as it turned out, Clay's instinct was wrong. After only ten minutes of wandering, George spotted a towering sign that declared its building "The Narezasha" in blocky, neon letters. And, similarly, there was no need to go searching through sprawling catacombs. Clay and George found the Night Thief parading around like a showman on tour, right in the casino's main room.

"Who wants more fucking money?" the slim figure bellowed. The crowd surrounding his makeshift stage (an overturned card table) roared in response, and the Night Thief laughed delightedly. "Yeah?! You all get more money!"

The Night Thief pulled a stack of credits from his belt and began tossing the pieces into the air. The people below him grabbed at the credits like dogs chasing a bone.

"He's certainly got them riled up," Clay noted dryly. "How easy do you think it'd be to grab him?"

George hummed for a moment. "Not very," the shorter man said eventually. "He's left all four sides open for escape. He can easily jump over the crowd, and none of the guards are paying attention to him. He must be a regular."

On the overturned card table, the Night Thief continued to throw credits away like so much spare change.

"And a popular regular at that," George added peevishly. "Gods. Why are all of our targets recluses or party animals? Can't we get one normal person? They'd be so much easier to pick off the streets."

Clay glanced at George. The shorter man stood with his arms crossed, watching the Night Thief with evident distaste. *Have you kidnapped someone before?* Clay wanted to ask. He kept the question to himself.

"Alright, well," Clay said after a moment of silence. "Here's what I'm thinking. Clearly, we can't just grab him like we planned. We settle in, watch his show, then call him out for something. He'll have to run, and one of us can catch him."

The engineer nodded slowly. “Good start,” George agreed. “We can block off his exits as well. The broker threw in a free tip, said that the bathrooms have some sort of hidden exit. I didn't really believe her, but it looks like one of this guy's paths is to the bathrooms. If there is a hatch or something in there, that'll be the easiest place to grab him.”

“Sounds good. Let's get to work.”

Clay gently touched George's elbow (a habit that he wasn't sure when he'd developed), then slunk into the crowd. The Night Thief had completely taken over one corner of the vast main room. The rest of the patrons ignored him, playing cards or trying their luck at other alien games. Clay settled into a seat next to a couple of bored-looking aliens and scanned the casino.

The Night Thief had positioned himself in perfect view of four exits. One was the aforementioned bathroom. Second, the gigantic doors to the kitchen, which were currently closed. Third, the main doors, and fourth, a ladder that led up to the rooftop. Clay projected the list to George, and when he received a mental thumbs-up in response, he narrowed his eyes. How to block off all the Night Thief's exits?...

The kitchen... if anyone left, he could knock them over with a Force tap and cause a distraction. Similarly, there was a circuit box next to the front doors. If Clay moved fast enough, the doors would be sealed until someone broke through his encryption. The ladder was also an easy fix. They just had to pull it up.

*How's the bathroom look?* Clay thought.

*I found the hatch. It's in the last stall, behind some of the tiles. How's it look out there?*

*Easy enough. I hijack the doors, knock over some kitchen trolleys, and convince someone that the Night Thief stole from them. You roll up the ladder.*

*You can't do all of that by yourself. I'll take care of the ladder and the trolleys.*

*Okay. We should start once the bathrooms are empty.*

*Yeah.*

For the next ten minutes, Clay sat and watched as the Night Thief paraded his wealth and shared it like a benevolent king talking to his subjects. The Night Thief seemed strangely... young. He was an adult, clearly, but not... a full adult, somehow. *How old is this guy?* Clay wondered absently. *He can't be much older than me.*

Finally, George sent him a thought.

*It's empty, and I put out a cleaning sign. We have five minutes before someone starts complaining.*

Clay hurried towards the circuit box. He disarmed the holographic node at his temple (because his red hair would only attract more attention), then pried the box open and worked his magic. The system was oddly simplistic. Clay only had to move two wires before the doors were alarmed and sent into panic mode.

The cries of protesting patrons reached Clay's ears. He allowed himself a smug smile, then closed the circuit box and slipped back into the crowd.

Clay couldn't accuse the Night Thief until the rest of the obstructions were in place. The ladder was already rolled up, and as for the kitchen...



Four chefs pushing identical trolleys suddenly exited the kitchen. The first one tripped over an invisible wire, and within moments, all four of them were on the ground, wailing about their fallen dishes.

Time to move.

A man walked away from the Night Thief's show, and Clay quickly slipped to his side. "The Night Thief is conning you," Clay whispered. He laced his words with the Force, which was probably the only reason why the man didn't punch him immediately.

"Conning me?" the man asked, frowning. "No, he's generous. I got a lot of credits from him!"

The man showed Clay the bag of credits he carried, and internally, Clay sobbed. Gods, he could probably refurbish the Temple with all that money. But that wasn't what he was here for.

"The Night Thief is conning you," Clay repeated soothingly. "Those credits are fake. In fact, they're illegal."

In Clay's defense, the credits were probably illegal.

The man mouthed Clay's words for a few moments, visibly confused. Then the Force took over, and the man's brow furrowed in rage. With a furious howl, the man punted his bag at the Night Thief. Somehow, the man was a perfect shot, and the Night Thief was clobbered in the face by a bag of credits. His pause in theatrics gave the man enough time to shout,

"These credits are fake!"

A hush fell over the crowd.

"What?" the Night Thief demanded, having recovered from the hit. "No! These are real!"

But the seeds of discontent were sown. Clay watched, satisfied, as the Night Thief's assembled mob slowly turned against him. Two minutes later, the crowd demanded blood.

*He's on his way*, Clay thought.

*I'm ready.*

With practiced precision, the Night Thief launched over the crowd and bolted. Clay quickly followed him, slinking into the bathrooms before the angry mob's leaders could spot him. He entered just in time to hear, "Hey, who the fuck-" followed by the sizzling crackle of George's staff and a loud thud. Clay turned the corner and found the Night Thief collapsed on the floor.

"George," Clay said disapprovingly. "Now we have to carry dead weight."

George rolled his eyes and began unceremoniously dragging the unconscious Night Thief towards the back of the bathroom. "It didn't seem like he was going to come with us peacefully," he drawled. "Help me out."

The two of them quickly moved the Night Thief into the last stall. Part of the tiling had been set aside, revealing a small crawl space.

"Remind me where this leads to," Clay muttered as he ducked into the crawl space.

"An abandoned building outside the casino district," George replied. The engineer had already gotten himself and the Night Thief into the crawl space as well and started to patch up the wall.

“You're going to have to move backwards.”

Clay glanced down at the Night Thief. The man was starting to mumble incoherent gibberish, and Clay grimaced. “Great. I love crawling through the darkness with an idiot in tow.”

“That's mean,” George responded instantly. Even in the darkness of the crawl space, Clay could tell that the shorter man was giving him a shit-eating grin. “I think I'm pretty smart.”

Clay decided it was best to bite his tongue.

The first five minutes of their journey was nothing less than hell. Clay's knees cried out in pain as he dug them into hardened earth and dirt, and his back screamed at being hunched and utilized at the same time. Finally, Clay's body was given mercy. The crawl space widened into a tunnel, which led to an abandoned building.

The building wasn't what Clay had expected. It was abandoned, certainly, but it was also missing two walls and most of the floor. It looked like the set of a dramatic final battle more than a building just outside the illustrious casino district.

“At least it's remote,” Clay muttered. He dropped the Night Thief on the ground and looked around again. “Looks like we're alone. How long until this guy wakes up?”

George pressed a thumb into the snoring Night Thief's neck. “Probably only a few more minutes,” he announced. “Most people don't stay out for more than 15 minutes when I use power 6.”

Clay blinked. “What's the highest power?”

“10.”

“Oh.”

George's staff was a fucking lethal weapon. How had Clay never noticed that?

Probably because he'd never thought to ask.

Using the extra rope that George had brought along, they tied the Night Thief's legs together and cuffed his wrists. Once that was done, Clay propped the restrained Night Thief against a broken couch and quickly rifled everything from the man's many pockets. With goodies in hand, Clay sank onto the only usable couch.

Seeing the Night Thief up close made Clay feel... weird. The man was lean, with pale, slender fingers poking out of fingerless gloves, and a blue sweater engulfing his frame. His dark hair was hidden by a black beanie, and his pants were tucked into ankle-high boots. The outfit was standard enough for an Underworld scrapper. But the Night Thief's face was clean and unblemished. He looked like a kid.

“How much longer?” Clay mumbled. “I want to let this guy go.”

George tossed him an odd look but responded with: “I don't know. Everyone recovers from the shock differently. I used a 5 on Nick when he came to pick me up, and he didn't even pass out. I think that-”

The Night Thief suddenly took a gasping breath, and Clay very nearly jumped out of his skin.

“In Tibulta's Name,” Clay growled. He glared at the Night Thief. “Don't do that. You scared us.”

The Night Thief didn't seem to be interested in listening to him. The man was too busy straining against his bonds and hurling profanities at the walls, mouth moving a mile a minute.

"Vocal," George noted dryly. "Do you think he'll listen to us?"

"Where the fuck am I?" the Night Thief howled. "Who the fuck are you?! I was just- no, I don't even care! Take me back the Narezasha *right now!*"

A headache bloomed in Clay's temples. "No, I don't think so," he muttered. "You have your staff?"

George lifted the weapon, and it crackled dangerously. "Of course," the engineer said brightly. "Let's see... I think a 3 would get him to shut up and listen."

Clay's stomach twisted uncomfortably, but he nodded. "Yeah. We just need to talk to him."

To his relief, George nodded in agreement, then strode over to the Night Thief. The slim man kept ranting right up to the point when George tapped his shoulder with the staff.

"Ow!" the Night Thief barked. "What the fuck, dude?"

"Will you shut up now?" George asked. His mouth twisted in a small, sugary smile, and he lifted his staff. Again, Clay's stomach tied itself into ill knots.

The Night Thief scowled. "Alright, alright. Scripta, you're pretty fucked up. Look, when most people get kidnapped, they kinda wanna escape. You know, like a *normal, rational person.*"

The annoyance on George's face was evident, and Clay quickly decided it was time to intercede. He stepped forward, nudging the engineer aside. George went with a muttered, "This guy is an idiot."

Clay crouched before the Night Thief. "Who do you run for?" he asked lowly. The slim man sneered, and Clay allowed a smug smile to crease his eyes. "Oh, look at you. You're so cocky, so confident in your abilities. I used to be like you." Clay tapped the node on his temple, and it reactivated, turning his hair a shocking shade of red. "I think I turned out better."

The Night Thief's eyes widened. "Nightmare?"

"Obviously," Clay drawled. "What, you didn't recognize me until you saw the hair?"

"A lot of people wear crimson down here!" the Night Thief protested. "Gods, this is dumb! Why the fuck are you here, kidnapping me, and not doing whatever the fuck you do in your spare time? And who's that guy?"

The Night Thief gestured vaguely at George, and the engineer scowled.

"You aren't really in a position to be asking questions," George said warningly. "It looks to me like we have all the weapons, and you're tied up on the floor."

The Night Thief switched to another language for a few sentences (Old Spanish, maybe?) before looking back up at Clay and George. "I'm not gonna roll over and do whatever you fuckers want!" he spat. "I'm a free citizen of the Underworld! Viva la-"

George tapped the Night Thief on the shoulder with his staff, and the slim man's tirade trailed off into multilingual swearing.

The sick feeling in Clay's stomach grew too strong to ignore, and he guided George a step away.

“He's not going to talk,” he said quietly. “I know this kind of guys. They'd rather die than betray whoever they're working for or dent their ego. They're made of pride.”

“I couldn't tell,” George muttered darkly. “A few shocks might do it.”

Clay frowned. “No, George, we're not going to shock him over and over. Even at a low setting, that's going to do damage.”

“So?”

For just a moment, Clay's heart stopped. It took all of his strength not to let his face collapse in disbelief and misery, and he barely kept a neutral expression. George had lived in the Underworld longer for years. It was acceptable and expected to hurt people as a means to reach an end. But... Clay didn't know how to stomach hearing that from George. George, one of the most caring people he'd ever known.

George, who was only human, too.

Then George's face crumpled. The engineer looked suddenly ill, and he slowly turned away, shuffling towards the corner of the room. Disgust and horror rolled off George in tremendous waves. Though it hurt to see his friend in pain, it was better to see that George wasn't as hardened as the rest of the Underworld.

But that still posed a problem. Since torture was out of the equation, what leverage remained?

A sparkle of silver caught Clay's eye. He glanced down and spotted the Night Thief's belongings spread across the coffee table.

Aha.

Clay sat on the rickety couch and began shuffling through the various items, ignoring the Night Thief's loud protests (“What are you doing? Hey, what do you think you're doing?! That's private property, you asshole!”). Finally, he found a thin, opaque card mixed among the random trinkets and stacks of credits. Jackpot.

“George!” Clay called. The engineer immediately appeared at his side, and Clay was relieved to see that George's eyes were unclouded and focused. “Look at this.”

A dangerous spark lit in George's dark eyes. “Oho,” the engineer chuckled, plucking the card from Clay's fingers. “Looks like the idiot made a mistake.”

“I'm not an idiot,” the Night Thief grumbled. “I have a name, you know.”

George raised an eyebrow at the man. “Oh? What is it?”

“It's 'Fuck you, bitch!’”

The Night Thief collapsed into laughter, and Clay pinched the bridge of his nose. He and George had really picked a winner. From what he'd read of Philza and Techno's report, he'd expected a silent spy, sullen and aloof. Not... this.

“Alright, get his hand,” George grumbled. “I want to see what's on this card.”

The Night Thief's laughter morphed into screams as soon as Clay grabbed his wrist. Clay set his jaw against the verbal abuse. Somehow, he managed to keep the Night Thief from moving while

George scanned the slim man's thumbprint against the tiny indent in the card. The card beeped.

Clay straightened, ignoring the Night Thief's snide, "That hurt, bitch." "Who is he?" Clay sighed. "I don't want to have to listen to him anymore."

George tilted the card, and suddenly, the screen changed. Name, age, gender, alias, and some sort of code all flashed across the card. Clay had no use for the code, alias, or gender, but the age and name... The Night Thief was 20, which eased his anxiety about kidnapping a kid. And the name...

"Quackity?" Clay said aloud. "The fuck kind of a name is that?"

The Night Thief (or rather, Quackity) glared at him. "It's my name, okay?" the man snapped. "Your name isn't fucking Nightmare, is it?"

"Well, Quackity," George mused. "I'm about to make your life miserable."

Clay shot George a sidelong look. *What are you thinking?*

George's dark eyes met his. *I know this type of card. It's only used by the Royal Vault on level 1004, which why there's so much information on it. Basically, without this, Quackity here can't get to any of the funds he's tucked away.*

The mesmerizing glitter of George's eyes made a grin tug at the corners of Clay's mouth. Gods, George was sharper than ever.

"Let's do it," Clay said lightly. He turned to Quackity, who was still glaring at them, and smiled wolfishly. "Who do you run for?"

"I'm not telling you," Quackity said flatly.

George held up the card, and for just a moment, hesitation flashed across the Night Thief's face. "You will, actually," George corrected brightly. "Or I destroy this. Nightmare, pass me a sword."

Clay drew his sword with as much dramatic flourish as possible, then passed it to George. George took it with a giant smile.

"You have ten seconds."

Quackity sneered. "No balls."

Clay actually winced. Before he could even feel sorry for the Night Thief, George dropped Quackity's card and punched Clay's sword through it. Electricity jittered along the ground, shattering the card into a million little pieces.

For a split second, a slew of emotions tumbled out of Quackity's mind. Distress was prevalent, both on the man's face and in his head. But among the jumble of anguish and anger, one thought echoed like an audible shout. *Oh, Scripta, no. Aries is going to fucking kill me.*

"Aries?" Clay repeated.

Fear flashed across Quackity's face. Clay felt like a chorus of angels was singing to him.

"Aries?" George asked quietly. "Who's that?"

"This guy works for Aries," Clay whispered back eagerly, and he couldn't stop himself from beaming. "He works for Aries! That's all we need!"

“Nightmare, I don't know who Aries is.”

Clay barely kept himself from laughing. “Don't worry about that. I do.”

Clay yanked his sword out of the ground, dusted off the blade, then shoved it back into its sheath. He snatched all of the Night Thief's credits and happily ignored the man's protests for the fourth time in as many minutes.

“You can't take that!” Quackity howled. “I earned it!”

Clay wiggled his fingers over his shoulder. “Toodles!” he called.

Quackity shouted profanity after him.

Once he'd rounded the corner, Clay slowed his pace until George caught up to him. The engineer did so quickly.

“Are we just going to leave him there?” George asked quietly.

Clay shrugged. “The Narezasha guards are gonna find the tunnel eventually. What's Quackity going to say? 'Oh, yeah, I was kidnapped by Nightmare, who hasn't shown up in years, and this nameless guy with brown hair.' Like, no one's gonna take him seriously. Even if anyone does believe him, Nightmare's reputation will keep them away from us.”

A smile quirked the corners of George's lips. “You're that notorious?” the shorter man asked slowly. “You're gonna have to tell me what you did someday.”

For a moment, Clay's good mood dimmed. He almost reached for one of his bandages, but he squashed the urge. “Someday,” he murmured. “I promise.” George threw him a puzzled look, but Clay hurried on. “Anyways, let's get back to the pipe. We got what we came for.”

The two of them were grimy and soiled from crawling through the tunnel, and both probably looked bone-weary. But Clay held his head high as they strode through the dazzling crowds of level 2087. He and George had finally uncovered their secret enemy. Aries. Aries was behind the attacks on the Temple, and Aries was the one who had made their lives hell.

Gods, it was good to finally put a name to the threat.

*So, are you ever going to tell me who the fuck Aries is?*

Clay glanced over at George, and he almost grinned at the engineer's annoyed stare. *Sorry. I will, but I want to get back to the hub first. There are too many people out here, and I'm going to get distracted if I explain now.*

*Fine. I guess I'll wait.*

Clay chuckled and receded from the mental conversation. As soon as he did, George's eyes widened to the size of moons, and the engineer tipped forward like he'd been turned to stone. Startled, Clay threw his arms out. He barely managed to catch George before the shorter man toppled to the ground.

“Tibulta, George, what's wrong?” Clay asked worriedly. He got no response except for shaky breathing, and fear gripped his chest. Clay hauled George off the main road and ducked into a shadowy side alley. “George?” he murmured, carefully leaning the engineer against the wall. “George, can you hear me? What's wrong?”

The engineer was still unresponsive, dark eyes fixed on the floor with blank attention. Clay chewed his lip for a moment and considered his limited options. He and George *had* to leave. Clay could read George's mind and try to guide the shorter man through... whatever was going on. Or he could-

George suddenly surged forward with manic energy. Clay quickly caught the engineer's flailing limbs (even though his heart was racing from the burst of movement) and pressed George back against the wall.

*Thank the gods*, Clay thought. "George, what happened?" he asked aloud.

The shorter man's eyes filled with desperation, and Clay's worry increased tenfold. "Someone's coming," George whispered frantically. "I can feel them. There's, like, five of them, and they're after us. They're after *us*."

In another situation, Clay would have asked when George had suddenly redeveloped the ability to sense people through the Force. He also would have asked how George knew that mercenaries were coming for them, specifically.

But George's Force presence was drowning in fear. The engineer was certain about this.

"Okay," Clay murmured. "Do you know if we can get back to the pipe in time?"

George swallowed several times before he said anything. "I don't know. We have to try."

"Okay."

Clay released George from the pin (which he only realized he'd been holding until he let go), then grabbed the engineer's hand and dove into the crowds again. He relied solely on George's hazy guidance, and for a few minutes, that was all Clay worked off of.

Then he felt them, too.

Five ferocious Force presences, rushing towards them at alarming speeds. Were they using vehicles?

It didn't matter. Clay and George couldn't outrun them. If George hadn't felt... whatever he did, they could have already been caught. But at the speed the mercenaries were moving, they'd catch up in a matter of seconds.

Where could they hide?

Clay started to panic. The disgusting energy of level 2087 was feeding all his negative emotions and charging him with nervous energy. He had to focus, or he and George were going to die. The shorter man was still out of it, judging by his dazed expression. It was down to Clay.

"Over here."

Clay blinked himself out of his hysteria. George was blearily tugging him towards a small side alley that Clay hadn't even noticed, tucked between two buildings. It was perfect. There were even some barrels to provide extra cover. Again, Clay wanted to ask how George had noticed such an out of the way spot. But they didn't have the time.

Clay dragged George into the alley and shoved the shorter man against the barrels. The two of them pressed next to each other, shoulders and chests heaving. After a few seconds, George's eyes

cleared. Clay sighed in relief. Alright. They were both back to normal.

Then the five Force presences turned the corner and came barreling down the street. A moment later, engine roar reached Clay's ears, followed immediately by several engines shutting off in unison.

Clay took a deep breath and held it. With any luck, their hunters would walk right past.

George suddenly began gasping.

Clay cringed and glanced at George frantically, silently pleading for the engineer to get himself under control. George's eyes widened in frustration, but his shoulders kept heaving, and his breaths came in short, loud gasps.

Gods, the mercenaries were going to hear them.

For a moment, Clay just stared at his panicking friend. Then he made a decision. *Sorry, George*, he thought, and frantically undid the bandages around his left hand. Once it was unwrapped, Clay clamped his hand over the shorter man's mouth. The contact allowed him to wash George's mind with peace and serenity, and George's eyes fluttered shut. It was an old Jedi mind trick, and in their childhood, Clay had promised to never use it on George.

Yet another promise he couldn't keep.

The shorter man slumped forward, and Clay met him halfway, resting his forehead against George's. *It'll be okay*, he thought gently. *You will be okay*.

Clay repeated the mantra for a brief eternity, keeping a steady stream of peace flowing through George's mind while still keeping track of the mercenaries' Force presences. Finally, finally, engine roar filled the air. The five Force presences moved off of Clay's radar.

Clay exhaled heavily. Slowly, he drew his hand away from George's mouth, and the shorter man blinked slowly.

"I hate you," George mumbled. "You promised."

Clay smiled guiltily. "Sorry. I kinda ran out of options."

George's face creased in a sleepy smile. It was then that Clay realized just how close the two of them were. George was still crumpled against the barrels, and Clay was crouched over him, one hand pressed next to George's head to balance himself.

In another life, maybe it would have been a different situation.

But that would never be the case. George was dazed and clearly exhausted from whatever the hell had happened to him. *Take care of him, Dream*, Clay told himself firmly. *That's what you wanted, isn't it?*

Clay hauled George to his feet, slung the shorter man's arm over his shoulder, then hobbled back into the crowds. Instead of heading for the Narezasha, he shambled towards the shuttle port on the opposite side of level 2087. With Quackity's credits, Clay could easily buy them a speeder to get back up to level 3716. Then they could get their things from the hub and get the fuck out of the Underworld.

"We have to get out of here," Clay muttered aloud. George only groaned in response, and Clay



smiled sadly. Even their victories were tainted by pain and strife. “Don't worry, George. We're leaving. We got what we came for.”

Aries. A name to the enemy.

Clay's thoughts drifted back to the Temple, and he smiled to himself as he hauled George along. He was returning to Tubbo a day early. He could keep his promise.

*I'm coming, Tubbo*, Clay thought, and he projected the thought across their bond. For the mission, Clay had mostly closed himself off from Tubbo, just to keep from getting distracted. Now, he was relieved to get an instant response.

*Hurry.*

## Chapter End Notes

And there we have it, folks... the conclusion to the longest arc thus far.

Thank you all so much for reading! Your support means the world to me, and if you're so inclined, please leave a comment and let me know what you thought! Comments and kudos fuel my inspiration!

As per usual, I'm taking a short break to prepare for the next arc, so the next update will be released two Fridays from now (Jan 29)! Let me tell y'all right now - I'm super, super excited for the next arc. I really hope that I can do my ideas justice TwT

Again, I thank you all. You are the best readers that I could have ever hoped for, and I'm so, so glad that this story makes y'all happy. It certainly brightens my life. Have a wonderful two weeks, everyone, and I'll see you on the 29th!

# Unbreakable, Part 1

## Chapter Notes

After eagerly waiting for two weeks, I've finally returned to share the first part of this new arc! God, I'm so, so excited, and I hope that y'all are as hyped as I am! I had such a blast writing this chapter, and... man. Believe me, this is going to be a wild ride. Let's get right into the story!

(11k pog, you're welcome lol)

Trigger warning for semi-graphic descriptions of death and injury. Always read at your own safety!

Welcome, my dear readers, to Unbreakable!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Bad plucked a few berries off the nearest bush and began tossing them at George's head, one by one.

The younger man huffed. "Really, Bad?" he drawled. "*Really?* I tell you about the horrible pain I experienced when I tried to use the Force, and your response is to throw berries at me?"

Bad giggled at the reaction. "I'm trying to make a point," he explained, though he couldn't hold back another giggle as his next berry bounced off George's nose. "I'm not just throwing berries at you. I'm throwing berries at you with the Force. Throw one back at me."

George rolled his eyes, but it was a fond motion. "No. Where are we going?"

Bad sighed and reluctantly dropped his handful back into the brush from whence they'd come. "I take it that means you don't remember the way?" he asked lightly. Bad paused to duck underneath a pokey branch, and he barely stifled his snickers as George swore loudly. "I guess not. Language."

"I don't know where we're going," George muttered darkly. The engineer wrestled with the branch for a few seconds before breaking it with another muttered curse. Bad winced at the snap. "I'm serious, Bad, I don't know where we are. I don't remember anything about the Gardens except for the allergies I got in the spring."

Bad spared the branch on the ground a pitying look. He cast a rune of mending over it, then continued down the tiled path. "I know it's been a long time," Bad admitted. "But... I don't know, I was hoping you'd remember something. It was a special place to us."

George was silent. Bad instantly sensed the guilt and sadness that drowned the engineer, and his chest constricted. He turned and planted his hands on his dear friend's shoulders, catching George mid-step.

"What?" George asked, hesitation evident in his eyes.

"Stop feeling guilty," Bad said firmly. "I know it's been pretty nice here since you got back, but the Temple wasn't good to you. It's okay that you repressed some stuff. Even..." Longing for a better

time suddenly clawed at Bad's heart. He chased the ache away and made sure that his smile never wavered. "Even this place. Now it's like a whole new adventure!"

George said nothing, and Bad was suddenly struck by the fact that he was still taller than the engineer by a large margin. Bad didn't like looking down at his friend. Besides... it hurt to see how weathered George's face was.

Dark circles under both tired eyes. Pale cheeks. A thin scar on his lower lip and fracture scars that shattered down his neck (most likely caused by searing electrical pulses).

Gods, Bad wished he could take George's suffering away.

When Dream and George had left for the Underworld, George had been doing better. Bad had seen some of the engineer's old pep and confidence. Now, it was gone yet again.

Bad heaved a tired sigh and tugged George into a loose hug. George went without complaint, and Bad rested his head against the engineer's.

*I missed you, Bad thought sadly. I don't think I ever told you that.*

Bad didn't expect a response, as he hadn't even projected the thought beyond his mind. But a moment later, a brilliant, blue presence appeared at the edge of his shields with a reply.

*I missed you, too. I missed our picnics and late nights and all those dangerous fucking plants you stole for me.*

A smile crept over Bad's face, though he buried it in George's hair. Some of his favorite memories were of the picnics he and George had had in the Gardens. In those moments, the two of them had talked about anything and nothing.

It was good to know that George thought of them as fondly as Bad did.

Bad released George from their hug and grabbed the engineer's hand, tugging him along. "Come on! We're almost there!"

"Finally," George griped with no real malice.

The two of them continued through the Gardens in content silence. Bad admired the wisteria trees that lined the path, the lilacs and gladiolus in raised planters, the purple stardust that drifted through the air. Admittedly, the "stardust" was probably pollen and would give Bad a terrible headache later in the day. But its beauty made the repercussions worth it.

Bad glanced at George and found the engineer looking around with an awestruck gaze. Bad barely bit back a smile. *He's remembering.*

"I didn't notice this part of the Gardens from the Hideout," George murmured. "Did I miss just this? Has it always been here?"

A golden rune of illusion suddenly glittered to life on a nearby tree, pulsing gently in the sunlight. Bad waved a finger, and the rune melted back into the bark. "It's kind of been here," Bad said mysteriously, giggling at George's annoyed glance. "Don't worry. You'll see soon enough."

After a few more minutes, Bad spotted the telltale patch of white roses. He grinned widely and dragged George off the path. The engineer complained loudly as they tromped through a stretch of mud, but Bad ignored him and pushed on. Finally, the two of them came to a stop at a gnarled

wisteria tree.

“Anything?” Bad asked hopefully.

George swung their intertwined hands for a moment before speaking. “Nothing,” the engineer reported with a distinct note of melancholy. “Well... maybe there's something. I don't know. There's this... echo in my head.”

Bad beamed. “Echoes are good,” he chirped. “That means you have a strong, happy memory of something!”

The engineer's cheeks flushed a few shades darker, and he ducked his head with an embarrassed mumble. Bad chuckled and stretched out his hand. *I hope this makes him happy*, he thought, and resolve bloomed in his chest. *Even if it doesn't... I'm going to make him smile.*

Bad pressed his hand to the tree trunk. The rune of invisibility he'd placed burned brightly beneath his fingertips, and with a single sweep, Bad brushed the rune away. The bark of the wisteria immediately began to shimmer, slowly revealing a crawlspace just large enough for a person.

Bad glanced over his shoulder. George stared at the opening with open wonder.

“Come on,” Bad said softly. “I took good care of it.”

It took George several seconds to move. Finally, the engineer obliged and crawled through the opening. Once George was safely inside, Bad slipped through as well and replaced the rune.

Beyond the opening was a small courtyard walled in by broken, moss-covered ruins. Wisteria and jacaranda trees lined the boundaries, and a myriad of flowers decorated the soft grass. The center of the courtyard boasted the largest wisteria tree of the bunch. It soared into the sky and reached out with slender branches, vibrant and aged and protective. The mere sight of it brought a smile to Bad's face.

“Oh, my gods. Bad...”

Bad glanced at George, and his heart melted.

The younger man gaped at the courtyard with childlike awe, eyes alight with joy.

“The Amethyst Garden,” George murmured. “I remember this now. Gods, you kept it alive. All of it. Even those stupid magnolias I stole from Master Mazenos when you were sick.”

Bad brushed a finger against the nearest flower. It flourished under his touch, opening violet petals and taking on an angelic glow. “Yeah,” he said fondly. “The Council wanted me to tear it down, but we'd put so much work into it that I decided to hide it instead. It's just one tiny corner of the Gardens. It doesn't hurt anyone by being here.”

George's head slowly bent to rest on Bad's shoulder. The emotions rolling off of George were as tumultuous as a roaring ocean, so Bad took the initiative and guided his friend towards the foot of the central wisteria. They both sank into sitting positions: George leaning against the tree trunk and Bad with his legs tucked underneath him. Just like it had always been.

“It looks like I haven't been gone a day,” George said softly. A gentle smile decorated the engineer's face, and Bad's soul sang at the sight. “Gods. It's beautiful.”

“I tried my best,” Bad chuckled. “Every time I learned a new rune, I used it on the plants. Most of

them worked, I think! I also kept everything tilled, so that probably helped a lot.”

“But...” George finally met Bad's gaze, and the smile slipped from the younger man's face, replaced by years-old anguish. “Why?” George mumbled eventually. “I was exiled and left for dead. Why *didn't* you destroy this?”

Bad smiled sadly. When he'd gotten the verdict that George had been exiled (and hadn't even been given a chance to say goodbye), he'd sealed himself into this garden and cried for hours. He hadn't let anyone in to comfort him - not even Zac.

“I think I always knew you would come back,” Bad said absently. He traced the prosperity rune hidden amongst the grass blades. “Or maybe I just refused to let you go.”

“That doesn't answer my question.”

Bad scooted closer to George and laid a gentle hand on the engineer's knee. The shorter man didn't shy away, exactly, but his body stiffened. It was a far cry from the happy, affectionate young man that had been one of Bad's best friends.

*Oh, in Tibulta's Name, George... what did the Underworld do to you?*

“I saved the garden because you didn't deserve to be exiled, silly,” Bad said as light-heartedly as he could. “Even if you never came back, I wasn't going to disgrace your memory by destroying everything. This was my last connection to you.”

It was forced cheer. Behind his happy mask, Bad wanted to scream and sob about how unfair the world was. But George was back now, if only for a short while. Bad was determined to make the most of their time together.

Bad took his hand off of George's knee and gestured around them. “I just wanted to bring you back here,” he said softly, giving the shorter man a heartfelt smile. “Where we used to hang out.”

If the engineer didn't want to stay in the garden (or, gods forbid, have it torn down), Bad understood. It was a terrible fate for the many faunas he'd raised within the broken courtyard, but he understood. Ultimately, it wasn't *his* garden. It was the garden that he and George had cultivated together.

Then tears filled the shorter man's eyes. George tipped forward, and before Bad could even react, the engineer had settled against his side, sobbing quietly.

“It's okay, Georgie,” Bad said soothingly. He ran a gentle hand through George's hair, and the younger man's shoulders hunched. “It's okay. Let it out.”

For a long while, the two of them stayed in that position, Bad comforting George as best he could. Eventually, Bad pressed his free hand to George's right wrist, where the engineer wore the protection bracelet. Bad spared a moment to smile (*He's still wearing it...*), then slowly siphoned away George's remorse and regret. It wasn't a permanent solution to the emotions destroying George from the inside out. But it was enough to ease the engineer's pain.

Finally, George's shoulders stopped heaving, and he leaned into Bad's touch. “Thank you,” he croaked. “I always hoped that you didn't hate me. I don't think I could have lived with that.”

“I could never hate you,” Bad chuckled, ruffling the shorter man's hair. “That's like, physically impossible.”

George pressed his hands to his face and fell silent. Bad chuckled again and carried on his steady combing.

After a few more minutes of silence, the engineer spoke again.

“Can I have protection runes?”

“Of course,” Bad said before he even processed the words. Then his brain caught up, and he frowned a little. “Did the bracelet not work? I thought I’d-”

“No, the bracelet is fine,” George mumbled. The shorter man lifted himself upright, rubbing his eyes with the back of his hand. “I just want actual runes,” George continued, clearly embarrassed. “I dunno. Clay and Nick both have them, and... I feel left out, I guess. I know it’s stupid. If it’s a problem or something, I get it.”

Bad grabbed both of George’s hands. “Stop,” he chided. “It’s not a problem. I only gave you the bracelet because I thought you’d be uncomfortable with the runes, and I wanted to protect you. I’m perfectly fine with this. But the runes are powered by magic *and* the Force. Do you still want them?”

George looked down at his wrist. Bad could see the gears turning in the engineer’s head, see the calculations that the younger man was running. Eventually, George nodded.

“Yeah. Go ahead.”

Bad clasped both hands over George’s right wrist and closed his eyes. The power of the amber sunstone bubbled cheerfully in response to his touch, and suddenly, a new idea struck him. Bad switched his grip (one hand resting against George’s palm, the other against the bracelet) and recited the incantation.

*“Ακούστε με τώρα και δείτε τις εκκλήσεις μου. Συνδέστε αυτήν την ψυχή με τη δική μου, για να τους προστατεύσω και να τους δώσω ασφάλεια.”*

The sunstone shattered, and the cord it had been attached to fell away. At Bad’s command, the sundust wove into his spell and sank into George’s wrist.

*“Δεσμεύστε αυτήν την ψυχή με τη δική μου, ώστε να νιώσουν τη δύναμή μου.”*

Bad opened his eyes. Golden power hummed underneath George’s skin. Slowly, carefully, Bad traced the rune of protection on George’s wrist.

*“Συνδέστε μας και επιτρέψτε μου να τα σώσω.”*

The magic rose to the surface and followed the pattern Bad drew, carving the rune of protection into George’s wrist. Bad snapped his fingers, and with a flash, the runes solidified. It now looked like a golden tattoo.

“All done!” Bad chirped. He released George’s hand to let the engineer survey Bad’s work. “I decided to keep the sunstone in the spell, so the runes will still keep you warm! Even if I’m not sending you any power!”

George examined his wrist in evident fascination. “This is incredible,” he murmured. “I remember when you wouldn’t even dream of doing something like this.”

Bad laughed. “Trust me, I’m still working on it. That’s why you, Dream, and Sapnap are the only

ones who have these runes. You're the only people strong enough to handle my mistakes.”

“Now he tells me,” George grumbled.

Bad giggled, and the engineer shot him a fond smile. For a few moments, they were silent as George continued his inspection of the new runes. Bad was content to sit there. He was happy just to hanging out with George again.

“I don't get it.” George suddenly dropped his hand to his side and gave Bad a searching look. “Why'd you quit active duty? If you're strong enough to do stuff like this and you can use the Force, you'd be perfect for the field.”

Bad blinked, startled by the abrupt question. “A lot happened,” he said carefully. “Didn't Dream tell you? Or Sapnap?”

George averted his gaze. “No,” he muttered, and Bad frowned at the misery in the engineer's voice. “I mean, I never asked them, 'cause I thought I'd talk to you sooner. Do you mind that I'm asking?”

“No, not at all,” Bad said brightly. “But it's a boring story. Are you sure you want me to tell it?”

George nodded wordlessly.

“Okay. Well, I flew out to Nim Drovis since the Drovians and the Gopso'o decided that their last civil war wasn't messy enough. We were so close to making a treaty! I even convinced their leaders to meet on a neutral island!”

Bad rolled his right shoulder and felt the scar tissue tug at his tendons.

“But there was this third faction that no one knew about. They hated both of the main tribes, so they stormed the meeting. I protected the leaders and got most of the officers out safely, but I got hit pretty hard. I'm lucky they didn't have to amputate my leg, actually.”

“That bad?” George asked quietly.

Bad grinned faintly. “Yeah. I still have the scars to prove it. But that's kind of all there is to it. The leaders called for reinforcements, and I was shuttled back here. When I woke up, I had a lot of new scars and bruises. And... I don't know.”

Bad trailed off, unable to put the way he'd felt back then into words. However, George was watching him intently, so he had to give some kind of answer.

The easiest course of action was probably the most effective. Might as well.

Bad pressed a thumb against the new runes on George's wrist and lowered his mental shields.

*Pain. Distress. Bad had been so scared of dying. Besides, his left leg would never be the same. Physical therapy had remedied his limp, but the ache never really went away.*

*Regret. Everyone had been so worried. Bad had woken up to find Zac leaning over him with red-rimmed eyes, clutching Bad's hand. When Bad had asked what was wrong, Zac had burst into tears.*

*Shame. Bad hadn't been able to bear the thought of going back into the field. He'd almost failed his mission. Against enemies more sophisticated than the people of Nim Drovis, Bad would have fallen. No Jedi should be so weak.*

*Understanding. Acceptance. Bad's future had never been one of a warrior. His path lay with the next generation of Jedi. His path lay in teaching the younglings and padawans to be the best they could be and watching them grow.*

Bad wordlessly withdrew his hand. He'd long since come to terms with his fate, and he could only hope that George did as well.

It took a few minutes of painful silence. But finally, George shook his head a little.

"I'm proud of you, Bad," the engineer said warmly. "I don't know many people who'd give up a life in the field to be a teacher."

Something akin to pride touched Bad's heart. "Oh, I'm not that special," he said lightly. "It just took me a little longer than the rest of you to figure out what I was meant to do."

George laughed softly. "I mean it," the engineer said, emphasizing each word. "You're special, Bad. The younglings and padawans are lucky to have you."

Bad wasn't sure how to respond to that. So he just tugged George into another side hug (which the engineer immediately returned) and gazed out at the fauna that decorated the courtyard. It had been worth it to save the Amethyst Garden. If not to protect all the beautiful plants, then to let George see it again.

"D'you think the task force will act on what Clay and I found?"

Bad glanced down at George. The engineer's eyes were fixed on some invisible point, glossy and unfocused.

"I don't know," Bad said archly. "I already told you that we're *not* going to talk about work stuff. But, if you insist on bringing this up, I'm going to ask about your Force connection again first." George groaned loudly, and Bad drove an elbow into his side. "I'm serious! That's your punishment for talking about the task force!"

"Bad," George whined.

Bad shoved George out of their hug so he could face the shorter man directly. "Don't give me attitude, Georgie!" he scolded. "If you want my opinion on the mess that we're in, then you have to tell me what happened between you and the Force. The *full* story, this time."

"The Force isn't a friend of mine that I had a falling out with," George muttered peevishly. Bad glared at him, and the shorter man sighed dramatically. "Okay, okay. Clay and I finished interrogating Quackity, and we wanted to get out of there quickly. But Clay wasn't looking around at all, so I thought I should use the Force to see if anyone was following us.

"I thought I'd be fine. Like, I could do small things with the Force again, and Philza had been teaching me. But when I tried to reach out... gods, it was like someone dumped me into an ocean. Everything was so loud, and I... I couldn't handle it."

George's face fell, and his eyes dropped to the grass.

Bad considered the minimalist explanation. It was clear (to him, at least) that George hadn't really reconnected with the Force. The younger man had mended the surface issues and called it a day. Until George carved every drop of fear out of his heart, he wouldn't be able to utilize all of his incredible power.



And he wouldn't heal.

"I want you to try something," Bad said, lifting himself off the ground. George gave him a wary look, and Bad rolled his eyes fondly. "I'm not going to hurt you, Georgie. Just get up."

Slowly, George got to his feet. Bad led them into the open space beside the wisteria tree and positioned them about fifteen feet apart.

"Okay, here's what I want you to do." Bad summoned magic to his fingers and shaped it into a ball of amber sparks. "Put your hands behind your back." George did, though his expression was notably suspicious. "Good. Now, I'm going to throw this at you. Use the Force to catch it and keep its shape."

"Don't I need my hands for that?" George asked slowly.

"Of course not!" Bad chirped. "George, you have enough power to stop this thing with just a glance. But you need to practice control. Are you ready?"

"No."

"Perfect!"

Bad tossed the ball at George. Panic flashed across the engineer's face, and he took a hurried step back. The ball of magic exploded on the ground and disintegrated into a flurry of sparks.

Bad gave the younger man a flat look.

"I'm sorry!" George protested.

"It's not going to hurt you," Bad said exasperatedly. "It'll just tickle a little. Come on, try again. Reach out like you're really trying to catch it."

Bad summoned another ball of magic and tossed it at George. The engineer stood his ground this time, and the ball hovered a couple of inches away from him. Then it dissolved.

"Better!" Bad called. "See? It's not scary. I bet you couldn't even tell that you were using the Force."

George muttered something under his breath, but there was a spark of hope in the engineer's dark eyes. "It wasn't terrible," George admitted eventually. "But I couldn't keep its shape."

"That's okay! This is a work in progress!"

The next twenty minutes passed as Bad expected them to. George became an expert at stopping the ball, but he couldn't seem to hold the magic together. Eventually, Bad recognized the frustration creasing his friend's brow, and he dissolved the ball he'd been holding. When George gave him a confused look, Bad simply shrugged and responded with, "We're running out of time."

The two of them wandered back over to the wisteria tree and sank into the shade. As soon as they were settled, Bad sat forward eagerly.

"Tell me about your shop!" he pleaded. "I've been dying to hear about it!"

George cast him a slight smile. "You're not going to tell me what you think about the task force, are you?"

Bad grinned widely. “Nope!”

The engineer heaved a long-suffering sigh. But when George met Bad's gaze again, the younger man's eyes were bright. “Okay, fine,” George conceded. “Gods, I wish you could see it. You were actually my inspiration when I was designing the floor plan. Your room was always so organized, so I tried to copy you.”

“Me?”

“Yes, you! You were my role model when it came to cleanliness, Bad. I *had* to try.”

---

Clay grinned at his panting padawan. “You sure you don't wanna get your breath back before you leave?” he asked innocently. “I don't think Rhodys will care if you're a few minutes late.”

Tubbo shot Clay a dirty look, and Clay coughed to hide his laughter. “Oh, sure, rub it in, Master,” the brown-haired boy muttered. “Don't take any pity on your padawan, who's been bedridden for almost two weeks. I'm *perfectly* fine. It's not like I have to get back into shape or anything.”

“Glad to hear it,” Clay chirped, and the irritation finally melted from Tubbo's face, replaced by a goofy grin. “Nice job today. You've gotten better at focusing your attacks.”

A blush tinged Tubbo's face, and he shrugged awkwardly. “I mean, I dunno,” the boy mumbled. “I messed around with the stuff in my room when I was bored. I got really good at stacking the books Tommy brought me.”

Clay shook his head. “I'd tell you off if I wasn't impressed,” he chuckled. Tubbo's face stretched in a shy smile, and Clay ruffled his padawan's hair. “You wanna help me clean up the arena before you head to class?”

Tubbo's face lit up. “Yeah. Sure.”

The two of them went about sorting through the mess they'd made, all the while rambling about whatever came to mind. It was a lot to put away (as Clay had pulled out droids, bots, and lasers for this training session), but to Clay, it went by all too fast.

Was Clay acting selfishly? Yes. After two weeks apart, Clay was desperately trying to make up for the lost time. Having his padawan's presence in the back of his mind again had felt like he regained a lost sense.

Besides... all the training they were doing made Clay feel a little less guilty.

When he'd heard what Tubbo had suffered through during his absence, Clay had almost lost it (which was putting it mildly). But, to his great relief, Tubbo seemed to be back to normal.

“How was the Underworld this time?” Tubbo asked suddenly, startling Clay out of his head. “I heard George mention something about food?”

Clay chuckled at the memory of the unexpectedly delicious cuisine. “The food was amazing,” he admitted. “George introduced me to a bunch of dishes that I'd never even heard of before. Gods, I wish I'd brought some of them back for you to try. I swear, that stuff was better than the rich districts' fanciest menus.”

A thoughtful look crossed Tubbo's face. “Does George know how to cook? I would think so since

he lived down there so long.”

Clay's first instinct was to laugh. George's destiny had never been that of a chef, and when they were younger, the engineer had achieved notoriety for burning a bowl of cereal. But Tubbo made a fair point. Perhaps something had changed.

“I don't know,” Clay confessed. “I'll ask him.”

“Maybe he could cook for you.”

Clay almost dropped the bot he was holding. He hurriedly settled the bot into its case, then turned to face Tubbo with what he hoped was a disapproving frown (but was probably more a look of panic and confusion). “Why would he cook for me?” Clay croaked. He instantly realized his mistake, and he swallowed the rasp in his voice. “I mean-”

But the damage was done.

A giant grin spread across Tubbo's face. “I knew it!” the brown-haired boy crowed. Clay scowled and began swatting Tubbo with the rag he'd used to clean the droids, but his padawan danced nimbly out of reach and continued his chant of “I knew it, I knew it, I knew it!”

“Oh, what do you know?” Clay asked crossly. “That I don't like the idea of being poisoned by an old friend? Who, by the way, was a *terrible* cook when I knew him.”

“No,” Tubbo said, clearly stifling giggles. “You want to have dinner with him.”

“I have!” Clay snapped. “And?”

Clay was vaguely aware that he wasn't helping his case in the slightest. But after being separated from his padawan for almost two weeks, Clay wasn't as concerned about maintaining his fronts as he'd once been. Honestly, if Tubbo hadn't noticed the cracks in Clay's story, he'd be a little worried.

Tubbo shrugged innocently, though the gleam in his icy eyes was anything but. “I think you should ask him to dinner again,” the boy suggested lightly. “Might be fun. A good way to take a load off!”

Clay punted the rag at Tubbo's head, and his padawan ducked under it with a gleeful laugh. “Go to class,” Clay ordered. “Be a good student.”

“I always am!” Tubbo called cheerfully. The boy ran towards the ramp, then paused and turned back, waving wildly at Clay. “Have a good afternoon, Master! I'll be at your room by 7!”

A fond smile spread over Clay's face. “Be safe, Tubbo!”

His padawan disappeared up the ramp, and Clay turned back to the remaining mess with his heart aglow. Most of the arena had already been cleaned. The droids were locked in the side room, and the bots were neatly settled in their cases. All that was left to do was dust off the benches. Clay didn't mind the extra work. He was still high on the euphoria of seeing Tubbo awake and happy.

But, by the time he'd wiped down the last bench, Clay had started thumbing through his mental to-do list. He didn't have any further obligations for the day, and dinner was almost two hours away. What was he doing to do with that free time?

*I could ask George to cook for me*, Clay thought, and he grinned at the idea. He had to admit, he was curious to see if George's cooking abilities had improved. He'd bring it up later.

Clay collected the rag he'd thrown at Tubbo and looked around the arena. Well, he still had half an hour left on his reservation. A solo session might be beneficial.

As Clay strode towards the droid storage room, decision made, he reached for his lightsaber. He could polish the handle, then practice deflections until-

His hand met empty space.

Clay stumbled to a stop, frowned, and looked down at his belt. Nothing was there.

Had Clay lost his fucking lightsaber?

For a painfully long moment, Clay genuinely thought that he'd somehow misplaced his most prized possession.

Then he glanced around and spotted another lightsaber (that definitely wasn't his) sitting on the bench where Tubbo had set his things. Clay smiled, relieved. Tubbo must have accidentally taken his lightsaber. No matter. They could swap when Tubbo checked in for curfew.

Fears alleviated, Clay paused in the middle of the arena. *That almost sent me into cardiac arrest*, he thought, mildly concerned for his wellbeing. *Maybe I should meditate first.*

Clay settled himself on the floor and closed his eyes.

Things had been peaceful. Since his and George's return five days previous, no attacks had been made. The Council had been in deep consultation about the lead on Aries, and their official verdict had yet to be released. It didn't matter, though. The task force had taken on Aries as their unofficial suspect, and everyone was searching for information.

So why was Clay so nervous?

Anxiety clung to him like a parasite, no matter how hard he tried to release it. Horrible “what-if”s drifted through Clay's mind, and all the pain his friends had endured tormented his conscious. Tubbo had been targeted by a sadistic Force-wielder, for gods' sakes! And where had Clay been? Down in the Underworld, oblivious!

That was the worst part, really. Clay hadn't been oblivious. He'd caught snippets of Tubbo's distress but had ignored it since he'd “had a job to do.” He should have known better. He should have taken care of Tubbo!

Something cracked.

Clay opened his eyes, startled by the sudden noise. The stones before him had fractured like ice and cracks now spidered all the way to the Outer Ring.

Okay, meditation definitely wasn't an option. Perhaps action would save anything else from being broken.

*I'm such a good Jedi*, Clay thought dryly, and he winced as he stepped over the cracked stones. He'd have to tell Rhodys what happened and pray that the Trandoshan didn't make him pay for the repairs.

Clay spent the next ten minutes shuffling through a series of balance exercises. Clay couldn't achieve the focus he usually did, which resulted in a lot of stumbling and cursing on his part, but moving served to alleviate his racing thoughts. It was better than breaking more of the training

arena.

Finally, Clay's wrist communicator beeped. His time was almost up, and he no longer felt wired. Clay nodded to himself, pleased, then headed for the bench that held his things.

*Dream! DREAM! Please, please, help me! They're back! They- OH, FUCK OFF! LEAVE ME ALONE!*

Clay's body moved before he'd even sorted through the barrage of emotions pummeling his mind. By the time he'd realized that a) Tubbo was the one flooding his mind, and b) dear gods, *Tubbo was in pain*, Clay was already halfway to the arena ramp.

*I'm on my way!* Clay thought desperately. *Where are you?*

Silence.

*Come on, Tubbo, talk to me! Where are you?!*

*North... wing... NO! STOP IT!*

Panic shot through Clay's veins. His breaths turned into short gasps, and he hurtled towards the ramp with arms and legs pumping.

Clay's left foot landed on the ramp.

What should have happened was that he kept running. Clay should have sprinted out of the arena and found Tubbo, and finally protected his padawan like he was supposed to.

Instead, the world tilted.

Far too late, Clay realized that he'd made a mistake. He flailed for something to grab but was met with only air. He was falling. The ramp had collapsed in on itself, and Clay was pinwheeling into a gaping hole.

Was that it? Had he failed Tubbo for the last time?

A small stone crashed into Clay's temple, and the sluggish acceptance that had paralyzed his body vanished. He scowled at the cave yawning below him. Oh, no, this was *not* happening. His padawan needed him, and Clay refused to let piss-poor construction get in his way.

Clay braced himself for impact. Even with the Force coursing through his body, Clay's left ankle twisted as he landed. He let out a stifled hiss but immediately straightened and cast his gaze overhead. The hole was barely 25 feet deep. With a powerful enough jump, he could easily escape. Clay bent his knees-

Then something came hurtling out of the darkness.

Clay snatched the "thing" and launched it back its thrower, moving on pure instinct. The thing (which Clay realized had been a polished spear) whistled away. A moment later, the sickly squish of impalement reached Clay's ears.

It was then that the gravity of the situation sank in.

There were people down here, weren't there? This wasn't a freak construction accident. This was a trap meant to keep Clay from reaching Tubbo.

Clay reached for his lightsaber, but that's right, it wasn't there. He then tried to jump, but his ankle collapsed under his body weight. *Shit, shit, shit*, Clay thought frantically. His nerves were still frayed from the barrage of emotions Tubbo battered him with, and fear steadily rose in his chest. He was unarmed and injured.

Another weapon flew from the darkness. Clay ducked under the wickedly fast javelin, then immediately rolled to the side. The automatic movement saved him from an arrow that almost snagged his shoulder.

Figures moved into the light. They were all humanoid, holding various weapons and clothed in dark linen. Someone above them began covering up the hole, and desperation clawed at Clay's insides.

*I have to get out of here! Tubbo-*

The miniature army attacked as one.

Clay ducked under the first wave of blows and spun in a tight circle, sweeping his assailants away with a Force blast. He tried to steady himself, but a sword plunged into his calf and sent him careening to the side. Clay grit his teeth against the burning pain. Both of his legs were out of commission. He released another Force push, but it barely hindered his opponents. His body was quickly fading.

“No,” Clay moaned. He drove stiff fingers into the nearest assailant's belly and sent them stumbling away. “No! You won't-!”

Pain bloomed in the back of Clay's head. His sense of balance abandoned him, and suddenly, the ground rushed up to meet him. Clay was unconscious before he even hit the dirt.

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Techno scowled as the wind plucked at his arms and legs. He huddled deeper into his robes and tried to ignore how the stitches over his stomach stretched. It didn't really work. The knife wound continued its cheerful attack on his pain receptors.

Time enough to complain later. Techno walked faster, hurrying for the task force headquarters like his life depended on it.

Which, in a way, it did.

After a full four days of searching, Techno had finally found a Knight's report buried in the Archives. Before this current catastrophe, no one had known of Illumina or Aries. So, when a newly appointed Knight had uncovered evidence of a friendly, business relationship between the two mob bosses, the majority of the Order had written it off as a ploy for fame.

If only Techno knew who had written the report. He wished he could tell them that their research would be the solidifying proof for the present investigation.

Heroes never received the recognition they deserved.

Techno scowled. Gods, was he old? The stab wound hadn't been *that* bad. It was certainly no reason for him to start reciting philosophy like an ancient thinker on the brink of death.

*I wouldn't mind some company*, Techno thought heavily. *Guess there's a first time for everything.*

Phil had been busier and busier as of late. That was the nature of having a partner on the Council, and over time, Techno had gotten used to it. But there were moments like these when he missed Phil's reassuring presence at his side.

On a whim, Techno pressed a glimmer of fondness through their bond. A mimicking spark immediately greeted him, cheerful against the darkness of Techno's mind. Techno smiled to himself. That was good enough for the moment.

The wind blew harder. Techno shuddered and walked a little faster.

All he had to do was get the report to the task force. The small holocron was tucked into the hidden pocket of Techno's tunic, safe from prying eyes-

*And the wind*, Techno thought irritably as yet another gust of biting chill dug into his exposed hands. He'd forgotten his gloves in his room and was paying dearly for it. *Where did this even come from? I thought it was supposed to be sunny this week.*

The wind seemed unperturbed by Techno's expectations and continued to blow like a youngling with a pinwheel.

As Techno walked, a feeling slowly grew in the back of his mind. Techno paid it little attention, as he often developed unexplained notions, and kept his head down. But the feeling persisted. And, when it hadn't faded almost five minutes later, Techno grew concerned.

*Did I forget something?* he wondered. *I have the report. I locked my room when I left. My-*

Techno patted the spot where his lightsaber should have been and groaned. Oh. He'd forgotten his lightsaber at the Archives.

Well, Techno was closer to the task force headquarters than he was the Archives. He might as well drop off the report before walking all the way back across the Temple. Besides, Techno was lazy by nature. Maybe someone would find his lightsaber first and take it to his room.

Satisfied with his reasoning, Techno expected the niggling doubt to fade. But it didn't. It lingered, another of the many clouds in Techno's mind.

Was there something else?

A blast of Force power exploded from somewhere nearby, lighting up like a mental beacon.

Techno looked around frantically. His eyes were immediately drawn to a pillar of dust wafting from the training arena, and dread settled in the pit of Techno's stomach. He changed course and sprinted for the rising cloud. Either someone had just had a horrible accident, or the traitor was making their next move.

As he approached the training arena, the feeling in Techno's mind grew louder and louder. It screamed of coming danger and begged Techno to turn around. It almost sounded like Phil.

But it wasn't Phil; it was just his paranoia.

The pillar of dust had been whisked away. The situation was definitely a mistake on the traitor's part. Lightsaber or not, Techno was ready to face their unknown adversary head-on and finally-

Techno rounded the corner and skidded to a stop.

The sky was now midnight blue. The moon glittered between wispy clouds, and the training arena looked as it had years previously. A figure in long robes faced away from Techno, their arms folded behind their back.

“Turn around!” Techno demanded. His voice sounded... different. Slightly higher. What had happened?

The figure let out a low chuckle. Slowly, they turned, silver hands pushing their hood away from their face.

Techno's heart punched through his chest.

“Hey, Techno,” the woman called cheerfully. Her jet black hair spiked out at random angles, and her dark gray eyes glittered maniacally in the moonlight. “I was wondering when you'd show up.”

It took Techno four tries before he could form a single word. “No,” he croaked.

The woman laughed. It was a pure, joyful sound. “Yeah, it's me!” she said brightly. “In the flesh! You said you'd know my voice anywhere, remember? That still true?”

It was. The woman's voice stung Techno's ears, burned his heart. His lungs weren't responding to his brain's demand for oxygen.

“You're dead,” Techno whispered.

The woman's thin lips curled into a nasty smile. “That's all you have to say?” she asked snidely. “And you're wrong, Padawan. This is real.”

Techno stumbled backward. He wanted to protest that he wasn't her padawan anymore, but then, something tickled his neck. Techno snatched the thing and found, to his horror, that it was his Padawan braid. Techno patted his belt frantically. A shiny, silver lightsaber awaited him.

“Do you believe me now, Techno? You can't save him. You never could.”

With cords of panic wrapping around his throat, Techno looked up.

Someone was crumpled at the woman's feet. They reached for the edge of her robes with a bloodstained hand.

“Please,” they rasped.

Nausea spiraled through Techno's stomach, and he collapsed to his knees. Oh, gods, it was *Phil*. The other man's hair was shorter, and he lacked any stubble on his chin, but it was undoubtedly, undeniably Phil. Techno knew his partner's voice better than he did his own.

“Ra-Lune,” Phil pleaded in a voice of broken glass. “*Please*.”

Ra-Lune gave Phil a disgusted look. “Of everyone on this filthy planet, you'd be the last to receive my mercy,” she hissed.

In one quick motion, Ra-Lune drew her lightsaber and plunged it into Phil's chest. Echoes of what should have been a Force bond bounced around Techno's mind, and agony clawed at his chest. Phil's body was bathed in the crimson light of Ra-Lune's lightsaber. For just a moment, their eyes met, and Techno watched helplessly as a tear slipped down Phil's cheek. Then the other man went limp.



Techno was utterly numb, head spinning and insides dissolving. "This isn't real," he gasped. He felt tears drip down his cheeks. "You're dead, and Phil's alive!"

Ra-Lune's smile was psychotic. "But for how long, Techno?" she asked jovially. She drove the heel of her boot into Phil's ribcage with a sickening crunch. "You saved him once. How much longer can you protect him from all the enemies you two have made? I gotta say, Techno, becoming partners? Not the brightest idea you've ever had."

Techno couldn't find the words to defend himself. Ra-Lune scoffed and strode towards him, stepping over Phil's lifeless body as she went. The hem of her bright purple robes dragged through the growing pool of blood.

"Just admit it, Padawan," Ra-Lune cooed. She crouched before Techno and gently cupped his face. Fire spread across Techno's skin from the touch, and he desperately tried to shove her away. His body refused to respond. "You're selfish," Ra-Lune said simply. "Weak. Needy. If you ever cared about Philza at all, you should have left the Order. Hell, he probably would've reformed the Council by now if he hadn't been looking after you. It must have been like babysitting a kid."

"No," Techno gritted out. He could barely see Ra-Lune's face through his tears, but he poured every ounce of hatred he felt into his stare. "You're dead."

Ra-Lune stared at him for a moment, lips pursed. Finally, she sighed and got to her feet. "That's where you're wrong again, Techno," she said, her voice heavy with disappointment. "I'm still alive *because* of you."

Techno wanted to draw his lightsaber. He wanted to run. He wanted to do anything that would break him out of this waking nightmare and take him back to the real world, where *something* was happening at the training arena!

Then a cold needle pricked his neck.

Darkness crept into the corners of his vision. Before Techno could do so much as shout, his body was enveloped by ink.

"You're not real," Techno whispered again. It was his last desperate attempt to dispel the ghost of his past.

Ra-Lune's pitying look was the last thing Techno saw before his eyesight went dim.

---

George had never paid attention to the floor of the task force headquarters before. Whenever someone gave him tasks, George carried them out in his room or with somebody else. Never once had he confined himself to a desk. But now, standing in the corner of the room, George found the floor particularly interesting. It was comprised of bronze tiles and some kind of dark oak.

In truth, George couldn't give less of a shit about the floor. It was just the only thing keeping him from punching someone in the nose.

Rage boiled in his chest, hot and furious against the cool exterior he'd put up for the world to see. The rest of the task force (most of whom were assembled in the room with him) would see him as level-headed and ready to assist in any way possible. Internally, George felt like he was carrying a bonfire that was on the verge of exploding.

He just had to be patient. Maybe, after the Council had their little discussion, George could

convince them that he should investigate. That would be easy enough, right?

George looked around, and he couldn't stop a scowl from crossing his face. After five days, the Council had finally decided to show up again. Their calm, well-rested faces looked out of place beside the exhausted Jedi of the task force. All except for Eret, who leaned on the table like it was his crutch.

*Can we start?* George thought darkly. *We're wasting everyone's fucking time. Who's even missing?*

As if they'd somehow heard George's thoughts, Rhodys scanned the room. "Who are we waiting for?" they asked tiredly. "Please forgive my lack of awareness. It's been a very long couple of days."

Before anyone could respond, the door to the headquarters slid open. A tsunami of raw fury poured into the room.

"What the *fuck* happened?"

Philza strode through the door, wrath etched into every line on his face. For a moment, all of George's anger drained away. He was left with nothing but a primal fear of the Jedi Master in front of him. George glanced around to make sure that no one was paying attention to him (they weren't), then shied into the shadows of the room. He had a sinking feeling that he didn't want to be a part of this blowout.

"Philza-" Cho-Nal began in a painfully patronizing tone.

Philza stopped in front of the Besalisk, and to George's amazement, Cho-Nal took a step back. "Don't you dare talk to me about being late," Philza growled. "Don't you fucking dare."

Cho-Nal said nothing. Slowly, the Besalisk retreated from the line of Jedi that made an informal circle around the main table. Philza was left alone inside the ring.

Silence hung over the assembled group, and George used the brief pause to examine Philza. The Jedi Master's face was painted with a kaleidoscope of emotion. George had never feared Philza before, had never worried that with a single trigger, Philza would snap. Now... it looked like the Jedi Master was on the edge of a rampage.

"Philza," Jahra said eventually, breaking the silence. Philza turned a deadly stare on her, and she stumbled. "Er... I mean, we have not assembled to express our emotions. We are here to discuss our verdict and decide-"

Philza slammed his hands on the main table, and everyone jumped. "The verdict doesn't matter!" he roared. "Techno and Dream are gone, and you expect me to give a single fuck about our *verdict*? We shouldn't have even debated this long! Dream and George had a solid lead! Can anyone tell me why we didn't listen to them?"

There was a wild edge to Philza's eyes. It almost reminded George of a younger Techno.

After a couple seconds of silence, Philza surveyed the room with arms held wide. "No guesses?" he demanded. "No one can tell me why the Jedi Council, the great leaders of this Order, spent five days debating whether or not they should believe the two people *they personally chose* for a mission?"

"Philza-" Jahra tried again.

Philza whirled to face her, and George saw real fear flash across Jahra's face. "I'll fucking tell you why," Philza snarled. "It's because deep down, none of you shitheads trust Dream. You built him up as your fucking golden boy, but in reality, you don't trust him any more than you do Techno. Or me."

...golden boy? So Clay had been telling the truth about that? George hadn't thought that Clay was lying, but he'd expected a little exaggeration. Maybe the Council really had been breathing down Clay's neck for the past four years.

Across the room, Delphina inhaled. Philza immediately leveled a rigid finger at her.

"Don't."

An unreadable expression flashed across Delphina's face, but she slowly closed her mouth. If George hadn't been so worried about the outcome of the meeting, he would have laughed.

"Calm down and listen to us," Mazenos said suddenly, tone stern. If they noticed the dirty look that Philza threw their way, they didn't react. "You are acting rashly. Do you not think that your connection to Techno is impeding your judgment?"

Philza barked a harsh, manic laugh. "I know that it is," he said. His voice was taut, conveying everything from outrage to hysteria. "It's been 'impeding my judgment' for years. But I am sick and tired of dealing with all of you! You pricks think Techno deserves to be kicked from the Order, just like George! They're just problem children to you, aren't they?!"

Philza's voice rose to a shout, and several people reeled back. George still felt numb, transfixed by this side of Philza that he'd never even dreamt of seeing.

"Two of the most powerful Force-sensitives in recent history," Philza continued, and his mouth contorted into a sneer. "And you fuck them both beyond repair. You exile the first one because he dropped the ball on an *impossible* choice, and you turn the other into a loner with crippling social anxiety. Oh, and do you remember what you did to the third one?"

Delphina inhaled again, but Philza bulldozed right over her.

"You brainwashed him, so he'd never think about the fact that you exiled his best friend. You brainwashed him to the point where he didn't know right from wrong, and he had to almost be killed in the Underworld to work through his feelings. *How is that healthy?*"

The room was deadly quiet.

George's head spun. Philza was pouring out so much information, but it was coming too fast for George to process. More than that... how long had Philza kept all of this bottled up?

Suddenly, the Jedi Master sagged. For a split second, George felt all the turmoil that Philza did. Hatred, despair, panic, guilt, ire, loathing. All of the above and more churned in Philza's head like a chef's brew.

How was the Jedi Master still standing?

"We used to be good people," Philza muttered. It seemed like he was talking to himself, but a hush fell over the assembly. "I grew up with a Council that was wise and just, but we changed when we exiled George. You all know that, right? We're spoiled little fuckers. A difficult problem came along, and we all fell apart. I mean, shit, the Council hasn't even touched the task force since we organized it. Rhodys is the only reason it's still on its feet."

Every head in the room turned to Rhodys, who visibly tensed.

“Philza, you have been my greatest help,” the Trandoshan said slowly. Each word seemed careful. “You brought Techno and Wilbur into this investigation. The three of you have spearheaded this from the beginning.”

Philza pressed his palms into his eyes, clearly exhausted.

And suddenly, George understood. Philza had been carrying the world on his back ever since George had left. With how caring the Jedi Master was, George's exile had probably crushed him. Everything had only built up since then.

Guilt wrapped an oppressive hand around George's heart. It had been rough to chisel out a place for himself in the Underworld. But what about his friends, who hadn't been able to run away?

That was what George had done, wasn't it? He'd run from the Temple and all his problems. Meanwhile, people like Philza had been forced to stay behind, obsessing over whether they could have done something differently.

No wonder Clay had fallen for the Council's charms. He'd been adrift at sea without any land in sight.

Sudden tears pricked at George's eyes. He shoved his face into his hands, but it did nothing to stop the guilt and shame that clawed his throat. Gods, what if George never saw Clay again? *And that's what I did*, George thought, horrified. *I disappeared, and he never knew if I'd come back. Same with Nick. Bad. Gods, what have I put them through?*

Suddenly, George realized that someone was talking. He forced all his unrest down and drew his hands away from his face. Jahra was giving Philza a lecture about the sanctity of peace and how Jedi were above such problems or some shit. But as George looked up, Philza caught his gaze.

*It's not your fault, George.*

George flinched, startled. A sad smile crept over Philza's face.

*It never was. Dream figured that out, just like Sapnap did. Bad always knew. They've forgiven you.*

George swallowed thickly. This time, he couldn't quite keep the tears at bay.

*Thank you. You're a good man.*

The light in Philza's eyes dimmed.

*No. No, I'm not.*

“Philza?” Jahra asked sharply. The Echani's voice brought George out of their mental conversation, and he refocused on Jahra's pinched expression. “Philza, did you hear anything I just said?”

Philza's smile became wry. “No,” he said simply. “I don't give a shit about what you have to say, Jahra. I've already made my decision.”

Jahra spluttered wildly, and a collective ripple spread around the room like wildfire. Philza met George's gaze again. The Jedi Master inclined his head, and with a sinking heart, George nodded in return. He'd been so, so selfish. Philza and Bad were two of the best men George knew, and both of them were willing to give up everything they'd worked for if it meant that other people could have

a better life.

“What decision?” Mazenos demanded. They leaned forward, glaring at Philza with narrowed eyes. “We make decisions as a Council, Philza, or not at all! Have you forgotten our procedures?”

Philza shook his head slowly. “You can't make this decision for me. I'm going after Techno and Dream no matter what you say. You can exile me when I get back. Or demote me, I don't care. If my last act as a Jedi is to bring Techno and Dream home safely, then... I'm satisfied.”

This time, the ripple seemed split between outrage and sorrowful understanding.

“Oh, come now, Philza,” Delphina snapped. Her voice cut through the mutters as quickly as a hot knife. “Haven't you sacrificed enough for Technoblade? Besides, what if he and Dream left to follow a lead? Or, if you'll consider such a notion, what if they deserted us? This is a very challenging time for all of us. Perhaps they couldn't handle the pressure.”

The steel returned to Philza's gaze. “I'll sacrifice everything for Techno,” he said quietly. “And you're an idiot if you think that he and Dream would abandon us. They disappear from the Temple without any warning, leaving their lightsabers behind, and your *first* thought is that they abandoned us?”

The silence was as oppressive as thick fog.

Finally, Rhodys broke the uneasy pause. “It pains me to see this divide among us,” they murmured. “But, perhaps, this has always been destined to happen. For ages and ages, the Order has taught that emotion is our greatest enemy. But... is it not indifference? Philza is willing to give his very life to save the people he cares for, and we shame him for being emotional? That feels... wrong.”

Rhodys trailed off with a pained expression, and they glanced at Eret.

Eret inclined his head slightly. “If we see Dream and Techno as wild cards, doesn't that mean that somewhere along the line, we failed?” he added. “As Jedi, we're supposed to help each other when we're at our worst, but we ignored their pleas for help. It's no wonder that they don't trust us.”

“That's absurd!” Delphina cried, but George could feel the consensus in the air. Even some of the Council members seemed to have been swayed by Rhodys' and Eret's speeches.

George briefly wondered if the two Jedi had planned this “revolution.”

Mazenos suddenly slammed their hands on the table once again, effectively ending the moment of triumph. “Now, wait just a minute!” they bellowed. “Technoblade and Dream are autonomous, are they not? You cannot say that we are the sole cause of their failure!”

Rhodys and Eret glanced at each other.

“Master Mazenos, Techno and Dream have gone through worse shit than you and I ever have,” Eret said quietly. “And they're younger than you by several decades.” Mazenos' face twisted in anger, but Eret held up a hand. “I've made *my* decision. Philza should be allowed to find Techno and Dream and bring them home.”

Mazenos scoffed and turned away from the table. Eret ignored the outburst.

“Does anyone object?” the Jedi Master asked slowly, and George thought that the single sentence sounded like a threat to the other Council members. “No? Well, then... Philza, you're free to go. Leave tomorrow morning at daybreak.”

Philza nodded. He glanced at George, and a small smile crinkled his eyes.

*I'll find them. I promise.*

George tried to send a thought back, telling Philza that he shouldn't go alone. But the Jedi Master had already left, sweeping out of the room with his robes billowing.

The door slid shut behind him. The room was silent.

“Good riddance,” Jahra muttered. “He's as far gone as the others.”

Something in George's soul snapped.

“Excuse me, Masters,” he said sharply, and he stepped out of the shadows. Several Council members flinched in surprise, and George allowed an icy smile to touch his face. *You forgot I was here, didn't you?* “Seeing as I'm not a liability to the Order, I request permission to join Philza.”

“Engineer George,” Delphina began with a huff.

“What about me?” George asked coldly. “What excuse do you have to keep me here? As you've reminded me, *Master* Delphina, I'm a civilian. The only life I'm risking is my own.”

Delphina looked around wildly, clearly searching for support. But George saw agreement from every other Jedi in the room, and he knew that this time, he'd won. If it wasn't such a dire situation, George might have smiled. It seemed that growing a spine and learning how to time one's requests made a world of difference.

Eret cleared his throat. “That was very bold of you, interrupting a Jedi Master,” he said, and an amused smile tipped his mouth. “But, unless anyone can find an acceptable denial, your request is granted. As soon as you leave this Temple, we are not responsible for your life or death.”

George nodded tightly. “I understand.”

“Alright. Then you're free to go as well.”

George looked around the room one last time. He saw the people he'd grown up with standing next to new friends. He saw rage from Delphina, Jahra, and Mazenos, approval from Eret and Rhodys, and curious amiability from Cho-Nal. These were the people George had allowed to control him since he'd been exiled.

No more.

“I request permission to join Phil and George!”

The sudden shout sent a fresh wave of surprise rippling through the room, and George watched, dumbstruck, as Wilbur materialized at the back of the crowd. How long had Wilbur been there? George hadn't seen him at all!

“Master Wilbur?” Eret asked mildly as Wilbur pushed his way to the table. “Are you sure?”

Wilbur glared at Eret in a way that was eerily reminiscent of Tommy. Or, perhaps, his padawan had learned it from him. “Of course I'm fucking sure,” he snapped. “I wouldn't have barged up here if I wasn't. Look, Phil needs Tommy and me, or he's going to-”

“Tommy?” Rhodys interjected, and they gave Wilbur a worried look. “You want to take him with you?”

“Of course,” Wilbur said as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. “Tommy's sensitivity is better than anyone else's, except maybe George's. He'll be able to sniff out Techno and Dream no matter how deep in the Underworld they are. And I need to come along to keep Tommy safe.”

“How do you know that Techno and Dream are in the Underworld?” Rhodys asked, clearly bewildered.

Wilbur's grin was wolfish. “If they weren't on Coruscant anymore, Phil would already be gone.”

Rhodys slowly shut their mouth.

Wilbur turned to face George, and something in the taller man's confident gaze steeled George's resolve. They were going with Philza. They were going to save Techno and Clay from whatever hell had befallen them, and not even the Council could stop them.

“I think that's settled,” Eret announced evenly. “You two have the same instructions as Philza. Will, I'll let you tell Tommy of his assignment.”

“Thank you, Eret,” Wilbur drawled. “So kind of you.”

A collective chuckle ruffled the crowd. For just a moment, George let himself be astonished by the change that four years had brought. Before his exile, he would never have imagined talking to the Council in such an informal way. Now, he spoke to them as equals.

Well, they weren't equals, and George had been very disrespectful. But the confidence boost was worth his self-serving white lie.

Eret clapped his hands once, which effectively drew George out of his head. “Alright, gents, you're dismissed,” the Jedi Master said firmly. “Everyone else, stay here. We need to talk about Aries.”

George nodded to Wilbur, and together, they left the room. As soon as George stepped into the setting sunlight, the weight on his shoulders eased. Something about the breeze that rustled his hair calmed his racing heart.

“How the fuck am I going to tell Tommy what I signed him up for?” Wilbur muttered. George glanced at the taller man, and he almost snorted at Wilbur's dismayed look. “Gods. He's gonna fucking kill me.”

“Isn't he *your* padawan?” George asked archly.

Wilbur glared at him. “Don't be cheeky. You've met him; you know what he's like.”

George thought of the rambunctious padawan (whose similarities to Wilbur at times seemed uncanny) and grinned. “It can't be that hard to figure out what you'd tell yourself.”

“Fuck off.”

George laughed, and the simple act made him forget how grave everything was. Then the wind whistled a little louder, plucking at George's arms with frozen fingers and immediately sobering him. It wasn't the time for levity. If not for Techno and Clay's sakes, then for Wilbur. The taller man looked ghostly.

“Hey,” George said quietly. He put a careful hand on Wilbur's shoulder. “We're going to find them.”

“Yeah. I know.”

The haunted look in Wilbur's eyes didn't fade.

## Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading! If you're so inclined, please leave a comment and let me know what you thought! Your feedback and support means the world to me <3

I know, I know, Dream and Tubbo \*just\* reunited... it hurts me, too.

Have a wonderful week, and I'll see y'all next Friday!



## Unbreakable, Part 2

### Chapter Notes

Hello, hello, everyone! It seems that I've lost the ability to post at a reasonable time lol, but I regret nothing - I've carefully crafted this chapter to its fullest potential, and I hope that y'all enjoy reading this as much as I enjoyed writing it!

And yes, I'm fully aware that I'm very heavily biased towards the SBI. Whenever I write one section from their POV, all the other sections end up being from the other members' POVs, I can't explain it either-

Trigger warning for semi-graphic descriptions of injury and threats. Be safe while reading!

Enjoy the chapter, my friends!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Phil shoved two crumpled shirts into his bag and refused to address the thoughts flying around his head like stray asteroids.

Of course, this refusal only exacerbated his worries.

Phil was fully aware that he'd gone a little overboard at the task force meeting. “*You can exile me when I get back?*” Gods, he'd basically invited the Council to find something in his past that could be twisted out of context and used to demote him (and that was the best case scenario). The selfish voice in Phil's head urged him to visit the Council before he left and say that he'd been making a point, nothing more.

But that wouldn't happen. Phil wouldn't give them the satisfaction of seeing him grovel, nor would he cave to his lesser, self-serving impulses. He accepted his punishment for his rebellion, whatever it may be.

Exile. Demotion. Being permanently separated from his family.

Phil swallowed the lump in his throat and shoved the next shirt into his bag with more force than was necessary. Phil paused. Both his hands were shaking badly, and an airy feeling encircled his stomach like a bad case of vertigo.

Defeat suddenly swept through his entire body. Phil tried to stand against the wave of sheer exhaustion, but his body crumpled under the weight, driving him to his knees and shooting spikes of pain into his eyes.

He was angry. Angry at Aries, angry at the Council, angry at the world. More than anything... Phil was angry at himself. He'd *known* that with Techno weakened, the pig Jedi would be an obvious target. And yet, he'd allowed himself to be dragged away by the Council and their bullshit debates. Phil should have known better. He should have been there to *save Techno*.

A scream of frustration grew in Phil's chest. He gritted his teeth and squeezed his eyes shut, desperately trying to keep all his turbulent emotions under control, as he'd done for so, so long. The

fire in the back of his mind seemed to notice his struggle, and with a happy burble, it lent its strength. The darkness cleared from Phil's mind in a purifying rush.

Phil allowed a weary smile to touch his face. "And yet, you're still helping me," he murmured aloud. The fire, which had gained a distinctive pink color in the past couple of days, flared brightly in response.

The fire was the only good thing to have come out of Phil's brush with death. With some of Techno's power burning in his mind, Phil could still feel his partner. Techno's exact location was lost in an infuriating haze, but Phil *knew* that the pig Jedi was still on Coruscant. And... still alive.

Their dim bond was the only thing giving Phil hope.

Hope. Right. Phil was supposed to be packing for a rescue mission.

Phil blinked himself out of his stupor and realized that he was hunched over, hands fisted in the carpet. He could barely recall his collapse or even how much time had passed. Phil grimaced and clambered back to his feet. He needed to meditate. Or talk to Techno.

...the fact that the second option even occurred to him was more worrisome than he cared to admit.

With a heavy sigh, Phil situated himself in front of his bag once again. He had plenty of shirts and several warm coats. His pants were still being washed by the droids, so he'd have to pick those up before he left. All that was left were shoes, and-

Three sharp knocks sounded from the door.

Phil frowned and glanced over his shoulder. An orange presence waited outside his room, concern and remorse bubbling underneath an aloof exterior.

Cho-Nal?

"Come in," Phil called warily, opening the door with a wave. Cho-Nal stepped into the room, and Phil fought back the urge to flee whatever conversation was inevitably coming. "Morning. What's brought you up here so early?"

"Drop the pleasantries, Philza," Cho-Nal muttered. The other Jedi Master didn't sound as annoyed as usual, though he was definitely... tired. "We both know that you aren't happy about this impromptu visit of mine."

Phil moved to stand face to face with his unexpected guest. "You're right," he admitted. "So what the fuck are you doing here?"

Cho-Nal's shoulders rose and fell with a silent sigh. For a painfully long moment, the Besalisk stood as still as a statue, eyes fixed on the floor. Finally, Cho-Nal met Phil's gaze with evident reluctance.

"I came to wish you a safe journey."

A derisive snort slipped out before Phil could check himself.

The Besalisk's double sets of eyes narrowed in unison. "Have you no respect, Philza?" he asked archly. However, there wasn't a single trace of acid in his voice. "Regardless of what you think of me, I'm here to... to..." Cho-Nal trailed off weakly.

On most days, Phil would have politely asked Cho-Nal to leave (inserting as much “fuck you” subtext as humanely possible). But a shroud of guilt and sorrow billowed around Cho-Nal, and the other Jedi's Master defeated gaze worried Phil. Damn it all, he refused to leave one of his own to deal with such pain alone. Even though it was Cho-Nal.

So, instead of running Cho-Nal out as he dearly wanted to, Phil sank onto one of the couches. “Why are you here?” he asked simply. “You don't care about me enough to wish me a safe journey.”

Cho-Nal reluctantly sat on the opposite couch. It was bizarre to be sitting across from Cho-Nal in his own room, talking like friends. They weren't friends. They never had been.

“I brought something,” Cho-Nal confessed eventually. He held out a hand and unclenched his fist, revealing a slim wrist communicator. Phil gingerly accepted it. “It's for the four of you. I'm going to give the other of the set to Padawan Tubbo.”

The name incited instant protectiveness in Phil's heart, and he looked up sharply. “Tubbo?” he repeated. The pink fire bristled in anticipation. Belatedly, Phil tried to soothe his anger and suspicion, but it did little to dampen the pink fire's enthusiasm. Gods, Techno's power really was potent.

But Cho-Nal didn't even look affronted at Phil's accusatory tone. “Yes, Padawan Tubbo,” he agreed. “I want the boy to be able to communicate with you while you're gone. He needs support in times like these.”

*What the fuck?*

“I didn't know you cared about Tubbo so much,” Phil said cautiously. How dangerous was the ground he treaded? “Is it because he's Dream's padawan?”

A ragged smile touched Cho-Nal's face. “No. He is just a boy who needs his family.”

For a split second, Phil genuinely thought that he hadn't yet woken up. This had to be some horrifying dream where Cho-Nal had been possessed or replaced by a shapeshifter. Phil dug a fingernail into the soft part of his wrist. The sting didn't dispel Cho-Nal's image or dim the other Jedi Master's indomitable Force presence. Phil was awake. *This was real.*

“Family?” Phil repeated dumbly. “We aren't family. Tubbo is friends with Tommy, but-”

“Do not try to pretend with me,” Cho-Nal chided. Something that could have been an amused smile tipped the Besalisk's mouth. “You, Technoblade, Wilbur, Padawans Tommy and Tubbo – you're a family. That's not a fact that you have ever tried to hide or deny.”

That was all very true. But confronted with such direct statements, Phil was at a loss for words.

Suddenly, Cho-Nal laughed. It was a bright, clear sound that made Phil queasy. He was about to die, wasn't he? Or perhaps be sentenced to death?

“Philza, don't look so worried,” Cho-Nal chuckled, once his mirth had died down a little. “I'm not here to make things any more difficult for you. I merely wanted to give you that communicator. Eret will deliver the other one to Padawan Tubbo, as I doubt the boy would want to receive it from me.”

Phil glanced down at the small communicator. It was a sleek, thin device that could easily be concealed beneath a jacket sleeve or in someone's bag. “What made you want to help us?” he

asked, pocketing the communicator. "Gods know that we've never liked each other."

The life in Cho-Nal's eyes dimmed. "We," he murmured, casting his gaze to Phil's balcony. It was still dark outside. "Us. Them. We shouldn't have parties such as these in the Order."

Phil almost laughed. It had been Cho-Nal to enforce divisions in the Order following George's exile. The controversial event had split the Jedi Order into two parties of opinion, each helmed by a Jedi Master: himself on one side, Cho-Nal on the other. It was sheer irony to hear Cho-Nal now preaching unity.

As if he'd picked up on Phil's train of thought, the Besalisk gave him a flat look. "I know that you don't like me any more than I do you," he said dryly. "And that will never change. But, to answer your question... seeing George stand up for his friends is what changed my mind."

Phil's stomach twisted into tight knots. "George?"

"Yes." Tired amusement spread across Cho-Nal's face. "Masters Rhodys and Eret also made valid arguments. Or, perhaps, I was finally willing to hear what they had to say."

For a single moment, bitter jealousy clawed at Phil's ego. *He'd* been the one to push for reform within the Order, even before George's exile. While Rhodys had always been relatively liberal, and Eret had undoubtedly been campaigning behind the scenes, Phil had advocated the loudest for years. Why hadn't he received any credit?

But he hadn't wanted to reform the Order for his own personal gain. It was for people like George, who had borne the burden of perfection. It was for people like Dream, who were forced to grow up too fast.

It was for Techno.

The resentment in Phil's stomach settled. For the first time since their surreal encounter had begun, Phil saw Cho-Nal for who he was in this moment: a Jedi wrestling with the expectations of long-dead Masters.

"George got to you, huh?" Phil noted mildly. "Let me guess. You started to question yourself during his bullshit trials."

Cho-Nal's glare lacked its usual venom. "Do I want to know how you reached that conclusion?"

"You called him George instead of 'Engineer George' when he asked. Couldn't help but wonder why you conceded." Cho-Nal grunted, and Phil smiled a little. "That, and you were the deciding vote in favor of his continued training. I was surprised that you were willing to hand him over to me."

"I didn't want to," Cho-Nal grumbled. For just a moment, the Cho-Nal of years past shone through: a gruff, stern Master whose only soft spot was his padawan. "But Eret spoke to me, and he told me of how George was damaging himself. I couldn't..." The Besalisk's face crumpled into a guilt-ridden grimace.

Phil raised an eyebrow at the sudden change in demeanor. "Is this therapy for you, Cho-Nal?" he asked archly. "Because I'm not licensed."

Cho-Nal's smile was jaded. "No, not therapy. Just an admittance of what I've known for a very long time."

“And what is that?”

“I was wrong.”

...what?

“I was afraid that I'd made a monster,” Cho-Nal continued quietly, seeming to ignore the shock that Phil knew was painted across his face. “And I did what I thought was right.”

Anger sparked to life in his soul, and Phil forced himself to take a deep, calming breath before he spoke. “Did what you thought was right?” he repeated slowly, using every bit of self-control he possessed to keep from shouting. Even *he* could hear the thinly veiled rage in his voice. “You thought that exiling your padawan was the right thing to do? That doesn't make any fucking sense.”

“I didn't say that my choice was the correct one,” Cho-Nal snapped. “Only that I did what I thought was right at the time.” The edge in the Besalisk's eyes faded. “However... I fully realized my error after watching George fight. If he spent four years in the Underworld and returned without a single trace of the Dark Side in him... then, perhaps he never had the capability for evil.”

Outrage still burned Phil's tongue, and a million and one caustic comments clawed at the back of his throat. But he kept it all inside. If he poured salt on Cho-Nal's wounds now, the Jedi Master would revert to his arrogant, demeaning self and never change.

“So, you think George deserves a second chance?” Phil asked. He still had to force himself to remain calm. “I mean, that's admirable, but you do know that he hasn't had a change of heart about you, right?”

“I know,” Cho-Nal murmured. “I cannot repair our relationship.”

The Jedi's Master's unspoken words hung heavy in the air. *But I want to give him and Dream a chance.*

“I still believe that you are out of control,” Cho-Nal added with a damning glare. “And that you were completely out of line in yesterday's meeting.”

Phil grinned sheepishly. That, he agreed with.

“But you are Dream and Technoblade's best chance of survival. You have my support in this matter. Should anyone on the Council try to use this against you, as I'm sure they will, I will do my best to assuage their worries. And, in your absence, I will try to uncover the traitor in our midst. We have been far too complacent, and I am disgusted with how this Judas has escaped all repercussions.”

Again, Phil briefly wondered if he was dreaming. But the deep ache of his muscles and the needles driving into his temples were proof enough that he was awake. Cho-Nal had really had a change of heart.

All because of his former padawan. Old bonds really did run deep.

“I appreciate your efforts,” Phil conceded, though it was a grudging admission. “Both for the Order and for me. And I agree. We've already lost too much to whoever turned on us. It's a gods-damned miracle that no one has died.”

Cho-Nal cracked a slight smile. “It seems we have a common goal, then.”

"Never thought I'd see the day."

The Besalisk chuckled and got to his feet. Already, walls of practiced composure were rising to hide the fragility on Cho-Nal's face, and Phil knew that the other Jedi Master's brief moment of vulnerability was over. Phil wasn't 100% comfortable carrying around such intimate knowledge of Cho-Nal's internal conflicts, but it was better than being clueless.

Then again, maybe not. It was easier to hate Cho-Nal than to consider him human, just like everyone else.

"Please take that communicator with you, Philza," Cho-Nal murmured as he smoothed out his robes. "If we are to find the person who has caused Padawan Tubbo so much pain, he will need your support."

Phil smiled faintly and was surprised to find that it was genuine. "I will. You have my word."

Cho-Nal inclined his head, then swept out of the room. Once the door was shut, Phil slowly and carefully reached his mind out to Cho-Nal's receding Force presence. Given the month they'd had, the Besalisk might very well be the traitor, trying to lull Phil into a sense of false security.

Orange, tight and coiled from years of self-doubt and the current guilt that ate away at his consciousness. Undeniably stern and stubborn, but also exhausted and remorseful.

Unless Cho-Nal could somehow trick Phil and Techno's combined power, the Jedi Master was just a man in pain, trying to correct his wrongs.

"Who would've thought?" Phil muttered to himself. "Looks like we've got ourselves a new ally."

Phil patted his pocket, feeling the outline of the small communicator. For as strange as the gesture had been, the communicator would do all of them good. Gods knew that their party was reluctant to leave Tubbo behind.

*But we aren't, Phil reminded himself firmly. I should talk to him before we leave... make sure he knows that we're just trying to keep him safe.*

With that thought in mind, Phil glanced at his wrist communicator.

Two more hours. Then the search began.

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Tommy ran a hand over the shiny wall. It glinted and sparkled underneath the overhead strip lights, and Tommy could see all the time and effort that someone had put into keeping this ship in top condition.

He hated every part of it.

Upon learning of the *batshit crazy plan that Wilbur had signed them up for* ("Why would you fucking volunteer us?" Tommy had demanded, only to be met with a steely glare that he understood all too well), Tommy had expected that they'd take a landspeeder. After all, the trip was only supposed to last a couple of days. Any longer than that, and...

Well. It was in everyone's best interests to make their rescue mission brief.

Regardless, Tommy had thought that a landspeeder was a reasonable choice. Instead, Tommy had

stepped onto the tarmac and found a compact yet elegant ship waiting for him and Wilbur.

Tommy tapped the wall with his knuckle and winced at how piercing the resulting noise was. Just how thin was the paneling? It seemed like a butter knife could puncture the flimsy metal.

Nausea drove sharpened steaks into Tommy's stomach. What if someone realized they were Jedi? The ship wouldn't be any match for a high-quality cannon. Or, even worse, what if raiders jumped onto the hull and tried to punch through? It would only take a couple of hits, then Tommy would actually have to fight-

*Stop it. You're a fucking good fighter, and you're not going to help anything by making yourself sick.*

The voice's sleepy tones made Tommy smile. *Aren't you supposed to be sleeping?*

No response. Tommy huffed a quiet laugh and strode down the narrow hallway to the tiny infirmary. Tommy hesitated for a moment, then shook himself and peered inside.

Wilbur was sprawled across the only proper bed on the entire ship, his tall frame bent in half to fit on the cot. His head lolled to the side, and his beanie was abandoned on the side table. For the first time in weeks, the taller man looked like he was at peace.

Tommy stepped into the room and closed the door behind him. "It's about fucking time," he griped to the sleeping Wilbur. "You were starting to look like a ghost."

Tommy had been trying for a light-hearted, teasing tone, the one he always used with Wilbur. What came out was something strained, equal parts fearful and fond. Tommy scowled. Gods, he wasn't *that* fucking worried. The truth of the matter was that Wilbur needed sleep as much as he did oxygen, and the Jedi Master had basically been holding his breath for an entire week.

...and Tommy had also been very, very worried. When he'd woken up that morning at 5 am and found Wilbur already bustling around, Tommy had gotten the distinct impression that his Master had never actually gone to bed.

"You're going to be the death of yourself," Tommy muttered, and he poked Wilbur's arm petulantly. Had the taller man been awake, he would have smacked Tommy's hand. "You're going to kill yourself before anyone else manages to get you. It's super annoying."

Wilbur didn't respond. A wave of embarrassment and sickened repulsion suddenly crashed into Tommy's mind, and he jerked his hand away from Wilbur's arm, his fingertips burning. What was he doing, lurking at his Master's bedside like a youngling with nightmares? Tommy had things to do! Like...

Well, nothing, really. But still!

Tommy nodded firmly (which would have been supremely embarrassing, had he not been overwhelmed by the sudden desire to *get out*), then rushed out of the infirmary.

The air in the hallway was no fresher than that in the infirmary. But Tommy still took a gasping breath and felt his anxiety ebb. He couldn't stand infirmary rooms anymore. They were...

*Tubbo, lying in bed, deathly pale and gasping for each breath, damaged lungs struggling to provide his body with oxygen.*

*Tubbo, eyes rolling wildly behind closed eyelids as he cried out against an invisible and intangible*

*enemy.*

*Tubbo, drifting in and out of fitful sleep and suffering from blazing fevers that nothing, not even bacta, could remedy.*

*Philza, face sickly, and his left shoulder a mangled mess of smoothed bone and burnt flesh.*

*Techno, at Philza's bedside, eyes devoid of life and raw cuts scattered across his hands from where his nails had dug into his palms until they bled.*

Tommy shuddered. He'd had enough of infirmary rooms for a lifetime. More than that, he prayed that he'd never see Wilbur in an infirmary bed. The taller man had already had his fair share of trauma.

Quiet voices suddenly drifted down the hallway, and Tommy perked up at the sounds of life. The ship's communal area was right next to the cockpit. Though Tommy dreaded the idea of seeing the abyss they were descending into, he liked the prospect of being alone even less.

Tommy burst out of the cramped hallway (which made him feel strangely claustrophobic) and found Philza and George sitting at a table, Philza's left arm laid across the tabletop. The sight of the exposed wires made Tommy's stomach twist once again. He searched for something else to pay attention to, but the only other distraction was the cockpit window, which displayed the massive vent outside.

Tommy swallowed thickly. There was just no way for him to win, was there? After a few more seconds of internal debate, he forced his feet into motion and wandered over to Philza and George.

“-so the end result was kind of scuffed,” Philza finished as Tommy approached the table. The Jedi Master's icy eyes flicked up to meet Tommy's, and a bright smile spread over his face. “Hey, Tommy. Is Will sleeping?”

“Like a baby,” Tommy muttered, looking over Philza's mechanical arm. It was a marvel of modern science, Tommy had to admit. “What are you guys up to?”

George heaved a long-suffering sigh. “This thing is stupid,” the engineer snapped with a considerable amount of heat. Tommy frowned, confused, and George gestured wildly at Philza's arm. “This! The wiring is shit, and the central structure has the wrong connectors in five different places! The great Jedi Master Philza over here thinks that 'it works fine,' but everything should be more efficient!”

The bronze exoskeleton had been polished to perfection, and golden wires wove around a bone-shaped center to create a semi-realistic arm. It didn't look entirely complete, but Tommy didn't see what the big problem was.

“It's just a standard prosthetic, innit?” Tommy ventured. George rolled his eyes with a drawn-out groan, and Tommy scowled at the mockery. “Oh, okay, okay, I get it. You think that you could have done a better job than the doctors.”

George's grin was deadly. “I'm a fucking Underworld engineer, Tommy. I could have done *so* much better.”

Oh. Right. Tommy had almost forgotten that the shorter man was anything other than a “former padawan.”

“Anyways-” George waved another disgusted hand at a bemused Philza. “I'm serious, Philza. This



is terrible design. They left everything completely exposed, and that makes it a target for anyone who knows anything about hacking. If someone gets a bug into your system, it's over. You'd basically have to replace your arm."

Tommy glanced at Philza skeptically and found the Jedi Master already shooting him a conspiratorial grin.

"I'm sure the droids and doctors did the best they could," Philza said soothingly, clearly attempting to ease George's ire. "They aren't perfect."

"That's not an excuse for shit design," George muttered darkly. "Stay here. I'm going to grab my stuff."

The engineer got to his feet, and Tommy quickly backed away from the shorter man's brooding aura. Once George had marched out of earshot, Tommy leaned closer to the table.

"Has he always been like this?" Tommy whispered.

Philza chuckled. "Sort of. He gets very, ah... *passionate* about his projects." Philza lifted his prosthetic and examined it curiously. "And, in this case, he's determined to fix my arm."

"I don't think it really needs to be fixed. It looks fine." Tommy inhaled to continue his train of thought, but then, George reemerged from the hallway with a small case in hand. Tommy quickly snapped his mouth shut. He didn't want to piss George off so early into their journey.

"Alright, hold still," George muttered. "I'm just going to clean up this mess."

The engineer sank back into his seat and opened the case. Tommy barely withheld a surprised scoff. The case contained a plethora of tools, everything from thin screwdrivers to exotic flashdrives and even what looked like a miniature flamethrower.

"That's quite the collection," Tommy noted, and he prayed that his voice didn't betray how impressed he was. "How'd you get all that?"

"Murder," George said, not looking up from Philza's arm.

A twinge of fear entered Tommy's mind.

The next fifteen minutes passed in relative silence. Tommy watched wordlessly as George expertly manipulated the wires in Philza's prosthetic, winding the golden cables around the "bone" and tightening a couple of (what he called) loose screws. It was a fascinating process, and Tommy was genuinely amazed by George's expertise. The shorter man hadn't seen a single schematic, yet he knew how everything was supposed to work and how to improve it.

But perhaps just as captivating as George's skill was the fact that he wasn't using any Force power to achieve his feats. Tommy hadn't felt the engineer call on the Force once. The Force very clearly burned within the shorter man, but it was like a campfire sheltered from the wind. It didn't burn out, nor did it grow. It just... was.

Tommy couldn't imagine being so powerful yet not utilizing any of it. Even as a youngling, he'd had an unbreakable connection to the Force. It was a constant point of contention between him and Wilbur: had the Force chosen him, or had Tommy naturally reached for it?

Finally, George straightened from his hunched position. Tommy belatedly realized that he'd leaned in close to watch, and he shuffled a couple of feet away from the table.

"How's that feel?" George asked, closing his case.

Philza flexed his fingers experimentally. Slowly, a grin spread across his face. "Better, actually. Much better. What'd you do?"

George shrugged nonchalantly, but there was a gleam of pride in his eyes. "I just cleaned up the design. It's like stretching your muscles after a workout. Everything runs smoother, and you're able to push harder the next time. You know what, stay here. I have another idea."

Once again, the engineer stood and hurried off into the other section of the ship. Tommy shot Philza a sidelong look.

"Does it really feel better?"

Philza rolled his eyes. "Yes, Tommy, it does. George knows what he's doing, y'know."

Tommy took a breath to remark how he wasn't sure how good a man shorter than he could be at anything. But suddenly, "*Oh, gods-damn it,*" rang out from the hallway, and Tommy again decided that his physical wellbeing was worth more than a quick laugh.

George exited the hallway with an annoyed scowl twisting his face. "I didn't bring any plating," the engineer explained as he strode towards the ship's controls. "Can we make a quick stop at my shop?"

Tommy blinked. "Plating?" he asked, at the same time as Philza asked, "Now?"

George turned to face both of them. "Yes, now," he said impatiently. "It won't even slow us down." Philza frowned, clearly wary of the idea, and the engineer held his hands out placatingly. "Philza, *please*. You're literally leaving your prosthetic vulnerable to every element that it comes into contact with. I literally have a stack of flesh-colored plating that matches your skin tone at my shop."

"Why do you have that just lying around?" Tommy asked before he could stop himself. George gave him a flat look, and the hint of danger in the shorter man's eyes set off alarm bells in Tommy's mind. "Okay, fine, fine, I won't ask. But it sounds really weird."

For a long moment, the cabin was silent. Finally, Philza sighed.

"Fine," the Jedi Master muttered. "What level?"

"4001," George said eagerly, already turning back to the ship's controls. "We're at level 4736 right now, so it'll take us about three and a half hours to get down there."

"Three and a half hours?" Tommy repeated incredulously. "That seems like a really long fucking time just to go down."

George glanced over his shoulder and shot Tommy a sardonic smile. "It takes about 30 seconds to cross one level, accounting for traffic and sudden stops. The time adds up."

"And how the fuck do you know that?"

"You didn't think that I lived on one level for four years, did you?"

Tommy had, actually. People on the surface always seemed to stay in one place for their whole lives, and Tommy had assumed that the Underworld operated the same way. Then again, maybe a

criminal wouldn't want to stay in one place for too long.

George flipped several switches, and the ship rumbled, clearly responding to his commands. Again, the engineer seemed to have an innate knowledge of the controls. It was uncanny.

“Why aren't I taught stuff like that?” Tommy grumbled to Philza. The Jedi Master gave him a confused look, and Tommy jerked his chin at George's turned back. “He fixed your arm like it was nothing, and he knows how to pilot this gods-awful ship. Why doesn't the Order have recreational classes or something?”

Philza's grin was somewhere between bewildered and amused. “I mean, we don't have extra classes, but masters typically teach their padawans how to fly a ship and all that shit. Didn't Wilbur do that with you?”

Tommy scowled. “No. I'll politely ask him about that once he wakes up.”

Philza snorted, and Tommy made a silent vow that he wouldn't stop pestering Wilbur until his Master taught him how to fly a fucking ship. If something ever happened and Tommy had to take the controls, he wouldn't even know where to start! His learning was a matter of life and death!

...not really. But it was pretty fucking important.

The ship rumbled again, and George glanced up from the ship's controls. “We're on our way,” the engineer announced. “You'd better find some way to entertain yourself.”

For the next three and a half hours, Tommy followed George's advice and kept himself busy. He reorganized his and Wilbur's bags (somehow he'd always been the neater packer between them), took his lightsaber apart and cleaned it (and gave Wilbur's the same treatment, because why not?), and practiced a couple of balance exercises. By the time George announced, “We're here!” exhaustion plucked at Tommy's legs. He hadn't slept well either, in large part due to Wilbur's unrest.

“Already?” Tommy asked, situating himself behind the captain's chair. George, who occupied the chair Tommy leaned on, nodded. “This is an abandoned hangar. Where the fuck's your place?”

George chuckled and swiveled his chair around, effectively knocking Tommy to the side. Tommy muttered a profanity-laced insult, but he was careful to keep the comment under his breath. He still hadn't decided if he was scared of the engineer or not.

“I didn't build it right next to a vent haven,” George drawled, collecting a bag from the co-pilot's chair and heading for the ship's hatch. “That'd be stupid. Tell Philza that I'll call if I need help.”

Before Tommy could protest the engineer leaving without any backup, George had opened the door and launched himself out of the ship. Tommy spluttered indignantly, but his complaints were met with nothing but air.

“Fucking prick,” Tommy muttered, crossing the room to close the hatch. “Couldn't even close the door behind him.”

Despite the grievances Tommy was voicing (to absolutely no one), he hurried to the cockpit and watched George head deeper into the hangar. Then, in the blink of an eye, the engineer disappeared into the shadows. Tommy didn't waste brain cells trying to figure out how the shorter man had done so.

“Did George leave?”

Tommy turned in time to see Philza wander out of the hallway with a strange mask covering the lower half of his face. “Yeah,” he said slowly. “Just left. What the fuck are you wearing?”

The corners of Philza's eyes crinkled. “Wait for it.”

Philza's voice had been lowered by several octaves, and his vocal patterns were different. Tommy decided it was better not to question whatever the fuck the Jedi Master was doing.

Then, to Tommy's amazement, a knock sounded on the hatch.

“Hey!” a heavily-accented voice bellowed. “You park in hangar, you pay the money! Not free!”

Philza waved a hand warningly, and Tommy quickly ducked behind the captain's chair. Once out of sight, Tommy watched, morbidly fascinated, as Philza opened the hatch and literally became someone else.

“If you dent my door, I'm going to cut off your fucking ear,” the Jedi Master snarled. “Here.”

Philza flung a couple of credits out the door, presumably to the owner of the hangar.

“This not pay! This change!”

“That was how much the sign out front said, dipshit. Change your prices before you try to fucking overcharge me.”

Philza slammed his palm into the controls, and with a pneumatic hiss, the door slid shut and cut off the alien's outraged protests. For a long moment, the air was silent. Then a defeated sigh reached Tommy's ears, followed by heavy footsteps. Tommy scrambled to his feet and peered out the cockpit. A heavyset alien with two beefy arms was wandering away from their ship, one hand wrapped tightly around Philza's handful of credits.

“How'd you know that that guy would show up?” Tommy hissed, whirling to face the Jedi Master. Philza began to smile, and Tommy flapped a frustrated hand. “No, no, I don't want to hear that 'Jedi Masters know everything' bullshit. *How did you know?* You literally got that fucking mask ready and everything!”

Philza shrugged innocently. “I've been down here enough. You kinda start to recognize the patterns and stereotypes.”

With that, Philza took off his mask and collapsed into the co-pilot's chair. He gazed out into the hangar with a strange sort of fondness, and Tommy had the sudden urge to ask just how comfortable Philza was in the Underworld. After all... he and Techno were basically Underworld mercenaries.

But the question felt like an affront to their mission.

So Tommy kept his mouth shut and took a seat in the captain's chair. He swung himself back and forth, torn between filling the silence and merely waiting for George's return. Tommy never really spent time with Philza. The Jedi Master was usually off on missions with Techno, working with the Council, or doing something equally important.

“How are you holding up?”

Tommy flinched, startled by the question. “What do you mean?” he asked warily.

Philza shot him an exasperated smile. "Tommy, it's me. I just want to check on you."

Fair enough. Philza had always been less interested in Tommy's technical performance as a padawan and more concerned about his wellbeing.

"I'm not doing so good," Tommy muttered. Philza raised an eyebrow, and Tommy crossed his arms defensively. "I'm not! Did you want me to lie to you? This is a terrible situation, and anyone who *is* okay right now is fucking crazy!"

"I guess so," Philza said absently. He clearly disagreed, but Tommy didn't bother to press the point. Philza was basically impossible to ruffle. "Have you felt anything yet?"

Tommy hesitated.

Wilbur had told him that he'd only been brought along as a Force-sensitive radar. In concept, Tommy was okay with that. He was more advanced than many fully-fledged Jedi in that regard, and he was damn proud of his talent. But throughout their five-hour journey, Tommy had reached his mind out as far as it could go and felt nothing. Not even a hint of Techno's distinctive Force presence.

Tommy hadn't told anyone yet. Why would he? If he couldn't perform his function, then he'd basically failed the entire mission. Without him... they were adrift in a gigantic Underworld without a single clue.

"You're just going to write me off, are you?"

Again, Tommy was startled out of his head by the sudden question. "What?" he asked dumbly.

"I'm not helpless, Tommy," Philza continued, and his eyes gleamed with amusement. "It doesn't matter that you haven't picked up anything yet. Did you forget that I was willing to come down here by myself?"

"Er," Tommy said intelligently. He mentally slapped himself. "So, how do you expect to find them?"

Philza tapped the side of his head. "I have a couple of leads. Plus, I'm still connected to Techno, so I've been reaching out that way. Nothing yet, but it's a start."

Hope shoved its way into Tommy's heart before he could stop it. "Wait, really?" he asked, much more excitedly than he'd meant to. "Techno's alive? Why didn't anyone fucking tell me?"

Worry flashed across Philza's face. "No one told you?"

"No! I've been going along this whole time thinking that-"

Tommy inhaled sharply. He'd barely permitted himself to consider the thought in the first place, and even then, Tommy hadn't allowed it to fully form. But he could breathe freely again. Techno was still alive.

"I'm sorry that I didn't say anything." Philza's gaze was apologetic yet painfully guilty. "I thought that someone would have told you by now. Yeah, Techno's still kicking. He's down here, somewhere. I don't know where, exactly, but hopefully, you can help with that. Don't worry about finding him by yourself, okay? This is a team effort."

Tommy wasn't sure how to respond to that. He'd never been faced with such... what was the word?

Humility? No...

Respect. Tommy didn't know what to do when being given such respect. He was just a trouble-making padawan, wasn't he?

No. Wilbur had volunteered both of them, so he had to have faith that Tommy could be useful. Wilbur thought he was valuable. Philza thought he was valuable.

*Two of the only people that matter*, Tommy's mind whispered. He tried his best not to smile.

"Thanks, Philza," Tommy mumbled. Then another thought struck him, and he frowned. "How'd you know what I was thinking? Wilbur can do that since we have a Force bond, but you're just another Jedi."

A mischievous smile touched Philza's face. "Oh, I have my ways," he said lightly.

Tommy narrowed his eyes. He'd had his suspicions for a while, but now... he was starting to see it clearly. Being in such close proximity to Philza, he felt the differences in the Jedi Master's steadfast Force presence. There was a new, wild edge. Philza's Force presence glowed brighter than ever before, yes, but the glow was tinged with pink.

"You have some of Techno's power, don't you?" Tommy asked bluntly. Philza's eyebrows rose into his hairline, and Tommy felt a thrill of pride. "Yeah, I knew something was different! You couldn't hide it from me forever! I've never heard of two Jedi being able to share power before, but I guess there's a first time for everything. You guys are freaks, anyway."

"I guess so," Philza echoed. "What gave it away?"

Tommy sniffed primly. "Everyone's presence is different, and yours is green and pink now. That's weird and different and not like you at *all*."

For a long moment, Philza just looked at him bemusedly. Then the Jedi Master chuckled and leaned forward, ruffling Tommy's hair. "It is weird," Philza agreed. "I'm proud of you. I thought I hid it pretty well."

*I'm proud of you.*

Tommy grinned at the Jedi Master, steadfastly ignoring the foreign ball of emotion that had suddenly lodged in his throat. "Yeah, well, you also fucking *destroyed* the Council the other day," he added smugly. "Something *had* to be different."

Philza ruffled his hair again, and Tommy batted the Jedi Master's hands away with a cry of indignation. He settled back into his chair, angrily fixing his hair as he went. Despite what everyone seemed to think, Tommy actually put time and effort into his hairstyle, *thank you very much*. It wasn't just for everyone else to mess with!

It was at that moment that Tommy realized each of his friends ruffled his hair differently. Wilbur's hand was the roughest, often jostling Tommy around in the process. But when he smoothed Tommy's hair down, his touch was the softest. Philza conveyed fondness and a certain, constant disapproval. Techno's touch was rare, usually only employed when Tommy was out of line. But the pig Jedi was always gentle.

A deep ache suddenly spread through Tommy's body, seeping into his very bones. He couldn't even remember the last time that all five of them had been together: him, Wilbur, Philza, Techno, and Tubbo. He missed those times.

A gentle presence touched the edge of Tommy's shields. He glanced up. Philza was looking at him fondly, wearing a weary smile.

"Techno's tough," Philza murmured. "Tougher than most. He'll make it. Dream, too."

Tommy nodded wordlessly. As much as he wanted to blindly believe that everything would be okay, the hell they'd been through in the past month had jaded him. There was no such thing as "easy" anymore.

A light on one of the ship's control panels suddenly lit up, and Tommy sat forward eagerly, grateful for the call to action.

"Hello?" George's voice asked from the glowing light. *"Okay, well, I'm going to assume that you can hear me. I'd appreciate some help. Someone boarded up the front of my shop. I don't want to break in through the back because my security system was really fucking expensive, and repairing it would be a pain in the ass."*

Philza chuckled and pressed a button next to the light. "On our way," he reported. The Jedi Master then rose from his chair, gesturing for Tommy to follow him. "Come on. Let's go help him out."

"I'm coming, too?" Tommy asked, surprised. He didn't know if he was excited or horrified at the chance to leave the ship. "Shouldn't someone stay behind to look after Will? He's gonna be pretty fucking worried if he wakes up and we aren't here."

A glint sparkled to life in Philza's piercing eyes. "I thought that you've always wanted to visit the Underworld, Tommy."

Now that was just a fucking challenge.

Tommy leaped to his feet and hurried to the other side of the room, snatching his lightsaber from the table. *Deep breaths*, he told himself nervously. *You trained for this. Wilbur prepared you for this.*

The thought provided little comfort.

"Hurry up, Tommy. George is waiting for us."

Tommy inhaled once. Then he turned and rushed after Philza, who had already exited the ship. Tommy had to jump off the ramp to make up for his hesitation had cost. "How do you know where George is?" Tommy hissed once he'd finally caught up. "And-"

Philza held up a single finger. A warning. Tommy obediently clamped his mouth shut.

A moment later, they left the hangar through a pair of double doors and stepped into a crowded street. Philza hung a sharp left, and Tommy scrambled to follow the Jedi Master. They moved silently through the crowd. Not a single person gave them a second glance. If Tommy didn't know better, he'd say that their gazes were being directed by an invisible hand.

Then again...

Tommy glanced at the back of Philza's head. The Jedi Master's shoulders were loose, but power swirled around Philza like he was the eye of a storm.

Is this what it took to be part of the Underworld? Constant vigilance and more control than Tommy had ever seen before?

The prospect was terrifying.

Three minutes later, Philza dragged them off of the main street and down a short alley. When they emerged from the dingy passageway, a compact, metallic building sat before them. It should have looked like a prison, with no visible windows and sharp angles on every corner, but instead, it looked strangely welcoming. In front of the building stood a disgruntled George.

"I fucking hate the Underworld," the engineer muttered as Tommy and Philza joined him at the boarded-up door. "Can you please cut this?"

Philza glanced expectantly to Tommy. Nerves suddenly exploded to life in Tommy's gut, and he barely kept from taking a shaky step backward. Oh, Holy Kantos, he was really doing this. *He was in the Underworld, preparing to-*

No. It was stupid to be so worried over something so trivial.

Tommy drew his lightsaber and exhaled. Grace and poise. In one fluid motion, he sliced his lightsaber across the boards. The panels clattered to the ground in neat unison.

"Looks like you do have some potential," George said brightly. Tommy scowled, but George moved past him before he could verbalize his annoyance. Tommy heaved a sigh and let the moment slide - for the time being, at least.

George tapped a code into the control panel, and the door immediately lifted, granting them access to George's shop.

Tommy had expected a cluttered workspace, with parts and machinery scattered everywhere. Instead, he stepped into a tidy shop, everything neatly organized and a counter devoid of trinkets waiting for them. Tommy glanced at George. The engineer's face was soft with a joy that Tommy had never expected from the acerbic man.

"This is a nice place," Philza said appreciatively. "Must have cost a fortune."

"Not really," the engineer replied absently. The haze of nostalgia disappeared from George's eyes. "I'll grab the paneling."

George headed towards a curtain at the back of the room, so Tommy took the liberty to look around. It really was cozy. Tommy hadn't thought that anywhere in the Underworld could be homely and professional and *clean*. It was... it was kind of strange. Wasn't the Underworld supposed to be completely different from the surface?

"Oh, *no*."

Tommy turned at the quiet lament, and his eyes immediately landed on George, who had returned from behind the curtain. The engineer cradled a small droid like one would a beloved pet, and grief was scrawled across his face.

"What's that?" Tommy asked softly.

George's smile trembled. "This is- *was*- Luca. It was in charge of my defense systems, so I guess that means someone tried to break in. Luca died defending this place."

Heartache flowed through the air like a rushing river. Tommy felt teary-eyed, even though he'd never particularly cared about droids. Then, with a jolt, he realized that he was accidentally taking on George's Force echoes of emotion. Tommy hurriedly strengthened his mental shields and



shuffled away from the grieving engineer.

“Hey, w-what are you guys doing here? This is my shop!”

Panic drove through Tommy's heart like a hot knife. He spun around and found a tall, wiry alien standing in the door of the shop. It held a box of junk in its arms, fear written in the lines around its eyes.

“*Your* shop?”

The fury in George's voice sparked a primal fear in Tommy. He turned again and watched, horrified, as the engineer's face darkened with rage.

“Your fucking shop?” George repeated. The engineer set Luca's body on the counter, then strode towards the tall alien, his aura shadowed and heavy.

The alien's lilac skin paled by several shades. But, foolishly, it stood its ground. “Yes,” it squeaked. “My shop. I bought it-”

“You didn't buy *shit*,” George snarled. The shorter man drove a finger into the alien's chest, and it recoiled with a pathetic whimper. “This place is *mine*. Let me guess, you're a squatter? You broke in, and...” A gleam of mania entered George's eyes. “You killed Luca, didn't you?”

Tommy shot Philza a desperate look. To his surprise (and alarm), the Jedi Master was watching the interaction with visible amusement. *Shouldn't we stop him?* Tommy wondered frantically. *He looks like he's about to kill this guy!*

As if goaded on by Tommy's thoughts, George grabbed the alien's ratty shirt and hauled it into the air. “You killed my droid,” George gritted out, enunciating every word. “If you ever set foot in this building again, I will hunt you down and cut your body into tiny pieces. Then I'll sear them and have them for dinner. Do you understand?”

George's left hand rested against his staff. Alarm bells wailed in Tommy's head.

The alien nodded too many times. “I understand,” it blubbered. “I'm sorry, 404, I'm so, so sorry. Everyone thought you were dead, and I just- I'm sorry!”

George's smile was as cold as ice. “I'm not dead yet. Run along and spread the word.”

The engineer released the alien, and as soon as its feet touched the floor, it turned tail and fled, barely stopping to gather its box of junk.

Then George turned, and his face stretched in a bittersweet smile.

“I'm going to miss Luca,” the shorter man said conversationally, as if he hadn't just threatened to brutally murder and consume a living being. “There's this ritual that I give all the droids that I can't save, or that just get too old to repair, which might make me feel better. But I think Luca would be happy knowing that the shop is still standing. It kept a lot of my security protocols running while I wasn't here.”

Tommy's voice abandoned him. After a couple of seconds, he regained the power of speech and rasped, “You're... you're not mad?”

George tilted his head curiously. “No. All droids break eventually. I know that better than anyone.”

“But- you-”

“Oh, that guy?” George scoffed, clearly dismissive of the encounter. “I don't really care if squatters stay here, to be honest. If they need a place to sleep, then fine. But that guy was stealing bolts and spare parts. If you don't stop the first wave, then your whole house gets infested, and it takes so fucking long to run them all out. Anyways, Philza, can you grab the plating? It's right over there. I just want to get my system back online before we leave.”

Philza inclined his head, tossed Tommy a glance that said, “*See?*” and strode off in the direction George had indicated. Tommy watched the two men start their respective jobs with emotions that he could only classify as various degrees of fear.

It was official. Tommy was terrified of the 5' 9” Underworld engineer.

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Techno awoke with a gasp. He sat bolt upright and frantically scanned his surroundings, searching for any sign of Ra-Lune or Phil's crumpled corpse. He saw neither. Instead, a dark marshland stretched around him. Thick, green fog hung in the air like a winter blanket, and strange plants burst out of brown and green soil.

Alright, so he wasn't dead. Techno took a deep breath with the intent to clear his fuzzy mind. But rather than oxygen, his lungs were assaulted by a terrible miasma. It was as thick as the fog in the air, and with that simple breath, Techno felt like he was being buried alive.

*Gods, what is this? Why can't I breathe? Am I dead? Why... why does my head hurt so much?*

Techno strained to breathe, but each new inhale only shoved a fresh layer of cotton down his windpipe. He was going to die, wasn't he? Gods, he was really going to-

Determination suddenly steadied Techno's spinning mind. In an instant, his head was clear, and he took a shallow, trembling breath.

*Breathe*, he ordered his body. *In and out. That's what gonna keep me alive.*

For the next couple of minutes, Techno sat cross-legged on the hardened soil, focusing solely on his breathing. The miasma was still horribly oppressive, and a headache was quickly building in Techno's temples. But, slowly, the cotton cleared from his throat. Each breath came a little easier. Eventually, Techno settled himself into a slow rhythm that he usually implemented during meditation. He wouldn't be able to achieve any record-breaking athletic feats, but it would keep him alive.

Techno opened fresh eyes. Thankfully, the landscape hadn't changed during his meditation. He was still situated in a shadowy bog, with nothing but alien plants and shallow creeks extending in every direction. Above him, Techno thought he could make out hulking stalactites. So he was probably underground somewhere. But where?

Before Techno could give proper consideration to the question, thin, snakelike wisps suddenly encircled him. Techno scowled at the interruption and swatted the air. The wisps reformed as soon as his hand passed through them. Their circling became tighter, and they closed around Techno like a predator hunting its prey.

Sudden fear punctured Techno's calm. He scrambled to his feet, and the wisps fled as if startled. Techno allowed himself a sigh of relief (which only exacerbated his headache), then reached out for Phil through their bond.

Nothing.

For a moment, Techno felt nothing but numb shock. Then his heart kicked into overdrive, and Techno desperately grabbed at the place where his bond with Phil should be. There was nothing there, only tatters of what should be, shrouded in haze.

*Is he dead?* Techno thought hysterically. *He can't be dead. I'm the one that messed up, right? I got caught. But... what if something happened to the Temple? What happened at the training arena? Gods, no, no, no-*

Techno's breathing picked up. He tried to settle his racing heart, but it pounded out of control, hammering a frantic beat against his ribcage. Again, cotton clogged his throat, and Techno's head spun wildly.

The wisps reappeared. They looked him over malignantly, *hungrily*.

Fury cut through his panic, and Techno snarled, furious at these tiny wisps which held him prisoner. He swiped at them with a roar of pure rage.

The haze in Techno's head cleared for a single heartbeat. His bond with Phil was still very much there, and he could feel his partner slowly descending towards him. Then the mist (which Techno realized had the same sickly green color as the fog surrounding him) returned, and their bond melted into rags. Just how it would look if Phil was dead.

Techno cast the wisps a dark look. "You're the ones behind this, aren't you?" he asked coldly.

The wisps disappeared like smoke in the wind.

Techno snorted at the avoidance, but the brief interaction had provided him invaluable information. First, he was still on Coruscant. Phil wouldn't have been able to get to another planet so quickly. Second, the miasma in the air wasn't poison... it was the Force. Only the Force could manipulate Techno's perception of his bond with Phil. It was also accounted for why he was so dizzy, like trying to walk without a sense of balance.

Why the Force was working against him, Techno didn't know. He'd have to figure that out later.

Someone coughed.

Techno spun around, already raising his hands to defend himself from the unknown threat. But it wasn't a threat. Someone in tattered, green robes was crumpled a couple of feet away, propped up on their hands and knees as they hacked into the ground.

"Dream?" Techno called hesitantly.

The figure's head immediately lifted, revealing a white mask scuffed with dirt. Relief washed through Techno's tired mind, and he started towards the other Jedi Master. Then he froze. What if Dream was yet another trick? Techno had been convinced that his bond with Phil had been destroyed. What if the Force was pulling from another of his deepest fears: being killed by a friend?

"Dream?" Techno shouted again. He got a labored grunt in response, which was better than nothing. "Tell me something that you never told me. It can be anything, just... what's something that I don't know about you?"

For a long moment, Dream was silent. Just as Techno was starting to wonder if the other man was

indeed an illusion, Dream spoke in a hoarse voice.

“I almost failed my trial on Ilum. I had my heart set on this beautiful crystal that I found on my way into the caves. I ended up falling into a pit and breaking it. As I was climbing out, I found another crystal that basically sang to me. That's the one that I used to make my lightsaber.”

It was as good a story enough as any. Decision made, Techno hurried the rest of the way to Dream's side and held out a hand. He'd lost his gloves somewhere, but Dream's hand was fully bandaged, so Techno didn't mind hauling the other Jedi to his feet.

“Where are we?” Dream asked. He immediately broke into a fit of coughs, and each noise was distinctly pained. “Holy shit, I can't breathe. W-why can't I feel you?”

Dream's voice began to tremble, and Techno put a firm hand on the other Jedi's shoulder. “We're on Coruscant,” Techno explained evenly, as he would to a nervous padawan. The last thing he needed was for Dream to panic as he had. “Somewhere in the Underworld. Phil is on his way to get us, but he's gonna be a while. We're surrounded by the Force, which is why it's hard to breathe. Just take a deep breath. Don't freak out.”

“Techno, I'm blind.” Dream's voice was strained, and Techno could feel the barely-contained fear roiling in the other Jedi's heart. “I can't- I can't feel anything, not even you. The Force is-”

“Gone, I know,” Techno finished heavily. “It's not good. But you can't freak on me, okay? I don't think I'll be able to help you.”

That seemed to sober the other Jedi. Dream began to take slow, deep breaths, and Techno waited silently. Dream probably needed time to familiarize himself with the landscape and come to grips with their situation.

Finally, Dream's face turned towards Techno. “Okay,” the other Jedi muttered. “Okay. So, help is on the way, but we don't know how long Phil will be. Could you tell if anyone else was with him?”

Techno grimaced. “No. I only got a reading on Phil, and I can't even feel him anymore.”

“Gods-damn it. I was hoping that we could just follow him out of here.”

Techno chuckled humorlessly and looked around again. If he hadn't felt Phil's presence, he would have thought they were on a different planet. Techno opened his mouth to comment on the fact, but then, his bond with Phil exploded with life.

A dizzying array of emotions tumbled through Techno's mind, and he gasped, fighting through the rush and reaching out desperately. This time, he pinpointed Phil's exact location. Level 5029, due west. The flash of clarity disappeared in an instant, but Techno was filled with new life and new energy.

“Techno? Techno!”

Techno shook his head to clear the ringing in his ears. When his eyes refocused, he found Dream giving him a worried frown.

“What was that?” Dream demanded. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah,” Techno said, still a little breathless. “Yeah, I'm fine. I know where Phil is.” Dream's lips pursed, but Techno waved off the other man's concern. “No, no, this was real. He's somewhere to the west, so we should probably start walking.”

A small smile crossed Dream's face. "It'd probably be best to meet him halfway, huh?"

Techno nodded, still a little dizzy from the rush of power that had bowled him over, then headed off into the marsh. Their triumphant beginning was brought to a halt as Dream collapsed to the ground with a low hiss.

"What was that?" Techno asked, half-amused, half-worried. "What's wrong?"

"It's nothing," Dream gritted out. "Just my stupid fucking ankle. I think I twisted it when I fell."

*When did you fall?* Techno wondered. But he decided not to ask that question aloud, as Dream was getting to his feet much swearing and hissing. The other Jedi clearly couldn't put any weight on his ankle, and traveling injured did not bode well for them. So, despite his better judgment, Techno offered, "You can balance on me until we find a branch or something. That might make it easier."

Dream looked at him for a moment (or, at least, Techno assumed he was). "Are you sure?"

Techno hesitated and quickly reconsidered his offer. Phil was the only one he allowed to touch him. Even that one hug with Wilbur and Tommy had set his nerves on fire, and they hadn't even touched his skin. But... Techno and Dream were trapped somewhere deep in the Underworld with only each other to depend on. It seemed like extenuating circumstances to Techno's usual rule.

"Yeah," Techno said simply. "You?"

He had no idea of the reason behind Dream's all-encompassing bandages, but he assumed that it was a similar story to that of his gloves.

Dream nodded. "Yeah. We have to move."

Techno held out his hand and hauled Dream to his feet, slinging Dream's arm over his shoulders as he did so. As expected, his entire body immediately screamed at the foreign touch. But Techno gritted his teeth against the discomfort. Dream clearly wasn't any more at ease, but they both knew that they had no other options. Together, they hobbled into the fog.

There was nothing to differentiate the landscape. Everything was comprised of thick, green haze and treacherous land. Every so often, Dream's bad ankle got stuck in a nasty pothole, and the two of them had to haul Dream's foot out of the quagmire. At first, they both awkwardly tried to avoid contact. By the seventh time that Dream got stuck, Techno had no qualms about grabbing Dream's hand so the other Jedi could yank himself free.

Somewhere along their journey, Dream acquired a long stick. Techno wasn't sure where the other man had found it, and he got a distinct feeling that Dream didn't know either. Regardless, the stick was too long to be used as a splint, so Dream began dragging the broken bench against the ground to mark where they'd been. It was futile comfort, but Techno liked knowing that they had a trail.

After a good two hours of silence (was it two hours? Maybe three?), Dream finally spoke.

"Tell me something that I don't know about you. I just realized that you could be a hallucination leading me to my death, and I really don't want that to be the case."

There was a considerable amount that Techno had never told Dream. He immediately dug a cherished memory out of his past, and he smiled a little as he recalled it.

"I met Wilbur during a competition between the older padawans. Like, it was just the guys who were going to graduate pretty soon. Neither of us wanted to be there, so we just hung out in the

corner until the rest of the padawans finished showing off. He actually introduced me to Phil that day, too.”

“When did that happen?”

Techno struggled to remember the exact date. Finally, he hesitantly ventured, “Maybe three months before George was exiled? I'm not great with dates, Dream.”

Dream chuckled. “Don't worry, I remember hearing about that competition,” he said, clearly amused. “I really wanted to join.”

“You would have fit right in.”

“Asshole.”

The two of them walked in silence for a few more minutes.

“Why aren't we dead?”

Techno had been considering the same question ever since he'd woken up. “I don't know,” he said heavily. “I guess it means we're important to whoever kidnapped us. If we weren't, they would have just slit our throats and left our bodies down here.”

“That's pretty graphic,” Dream muttered. “You're right, but it doesn't make sense. If Aries is behind everything, how does he know who we are?”

“I don't think Aries kidnapped us. It was probably the traitor.”

“What makes you think that?”

“They got me with a vision of Ra-Lune.”

“Oh.”

It was a horrible situation. Someone in the Temple had become a turncoat, yet they decided to spare Techno's and Dream's lives like some kind of saving angel. Techno almost wished that they would have just killed him and exposed their horrid nature for the entire Order to see.

Almost.

“So it's probably someone close to us.”

“Maybe,” Techno said absently. “Or they might just want to separate the Order.”

“What do you mean?”

“Phil's already on his way down here. Since you're here too, George is probably with him 'cause he wants to help you. That's already two people out of the picture, and with you and me trapped down here, that's four of the most powerful Force-users away from the Temple. It's the perfect time for an attack.”

Dream fell silent, head bowed, and Techno felt a strange pluck of guilt for being so blunt. He'd never bothered with tact in the past, and yet, something about the forlorn tilt of Dream's head made him feel bad. But, ultimately, sugar-coating the truth wouldn't have made it any easier to swallow.

Fifteen minutes later, Dream lifted his head. “How the fuck did we let this happen?” the other Jedi

hissed. Fury burned beneath Dream's quiet tone. "We've been letting this traitor walk all over us, and we haven't even put up a fight. There's an entire Order of trained Jedi up there, for gods' sakes. How have we not uncovered one fucking rat after a full month of investigating?"

Yet another question Techno had been asking himself since waking up.

"We got complacent," he said simply. "When's the last time you went through a training session?"

Dream said nothing.

"Me too. I don't know. Maybe we forgot that we don't get to become Jedi, then take a vacation. There's still a lot that we have to deal with. I mean, I--"

Techno decided that he didn't want to finish that thought. After his... *experience* with Ra-Lune, it was evident that he hadn't worked through his trauma as thoroughly as he'd thought. But he wasn't quite willing to admit that aloud.

"Same here. They hurt Tubbo to get me."

Techno had gotten lucky, at least. He was stuck with the one other person in the Order who understood his reluctance to talk.

"Where's your lightsaber?"

It took a second for Techno's brain to process the sudden question. Eventually, he pieced the words together, and he smiled tiredly. "Sitting in the Archives. You?"

"In Tubbo's capable hands," Dream drawled. "I'm really glad that we didn't just hand our lightsabers over to whoever kidnapped us. It would just be a kick in the teeth at that point, having to fight someone to get my lightsaber back."

Techno grinned a little. "Saved by the powers of forgetfulness and haste."

"Heh. Just a Jedi's luck."

The two of them lapsed back into silence. They were walking over uneven ground, so Techno did his utmost to keep them from falling over. But then, an uneasy feeling pricked the back of his neck. Techno looked up.

The landscape still hadn't changed. But hidden in the shadows of a particularly tall plant, a figure stood stoically, watching Techno and Dream with unnaturally bright eyes. Their skin was as shiny and silver as the moon. Jet black hair stuck out in every direction, and purple robes billowed around them, brushed by a nonexistent wind.

"Hey, Dream?" Techno asked. The other man grunted in response. "Look at that really tall plant over there. Do you see anything?"

Dream's head tilted to the side. "No," he reported eventually. "Just a really tall plant."

Techno nodded. "Okay. Just wanted to make sure that what I'm seeing is in my head."

Dream chuckled dryly, and for some reason, that small bit of understanding made a smile tug at Techno's mouth. Maybe he and Dream had a chance of making it out of this hazy hellscape alive.

When Techno glanced back at the tall plant, Ra-Lune was gone.

## Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading! If you are so inclined, please leave a comment and let me know what you thought of this week's update! Thank you for your continued support! <3

Update to my publishing schedule: next week, you'll see me on Saturday instead of Friday. After that, it'll go back to normal!

Man, I think this is the longest section I've ever done from Tommy's POV. I guess everyone's favorite, loud-mouthed padawan had to get his turn eventually, huh?

Have a wonderful week, my dear readers, and I'll see you next Saturday!



## Unbreakable, Part 3

### Chapter Notes

Good evening, everyone! Yes, I'm not dead, and I haven't abandoned this story!

...I'm so, so sorry lol. Life went twelve rounds with me this weekend, which is why I'm limping back today, a Monday night, with an unfinished chapter.

Full disclaimer: I'm not done editing! However, I refused to put off posting for another day, so I'm here with incomplete work. Sometime tomorrow or Wednesday, I'll upload the completed chapter! I so apologize for the delay TwT but I promise that there won't be any major plot changes from this edit to the finished work! Things will just be cleaner!

Edit: This chapter has been fully edited! It's complete!

Anyways! Welcome back to the story! For as incomplete as it is, I absolutely loved writing this chapter, and I really, really hope that y'all do, too. It touches on some perspectives that I haven't addressed in a while, and... I'm just really happy lol.

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Nick chewed his thumb as he looked out over the tarmac. He prayed that no one noticed him hovering in the shadows of the archway like a creep, but then again, no one was looking for a figure in the background. Every eye was directed towards the departing group.

A medium-sized ship sat at the end of the tarmac. Philza stood with Wilbur before a small crowd (comprised mostly of padawans and younglings who knew the two Masters), and both wore matching tired smiles. If either of them had slept, Nick would consider it a miracle. Through the ship's cockpit, George was visibly prepping for the journey. The engineer seemed utterly disinterested in saying any goodbyes.

Nick's train of thought stumbled to a halt. He inhaled deeply, trying to soothe the instinctive hurt and resentment that sprung to life in his chest.

As soon as he'd heard that George had volunteered to save Clay, Nick had raced to the engineer's room and found him already done packing. For two whole minutes, their conversation had been nothing more than incoherent gibberish. Finally, Nick had blurted,

*"You're leaving me? Again?"*

That had been a little more indicative of his mental state than Nick liked. But, of course, George had pounced on the phrase as soon as Nick had tried to take it back.

*"I'm not leaving you,"* George had protested, his big brown eyes as innocent as a fawn's. At that moment in time, Nick had wanted nothing more than to punch the engineer. *"Clay needs my help, and-"*

*“Your help?” Nick had snapped. He'd barely managed to keep from clenching his fists. “Your fucking help? George, you're not a one-man army anymore! Philza and Wilbur, even Tommy - they're all going with you! Why can't you leave well enough alone and let them take care of this? Hell, why don't I take your place?”*

*“You're not-”*

George had cut himself off sharply, but Nick had heard the rest of the sentence all the same.

*You're not strong enough.*

*Nick hadn't been able to stifle his anger. “Oh, I get it, now” he'd snarled. “You think you're big shit since the Council is letting you go back down there. Okay. Sure. I guess I'm not good enough, even though I've been training ever since you left. I guess I'm not good enough since you beat me in your tournament. But, hey, fuck my hard work, right? All that matters is the Force and the lucky bitches who get blessed. I guess I'm not enough to help my goddamn friend!”*

George had opened his mouth, but Nick had whirled, storming out of George's room without so much as a backwards glance.

Several hours later, Nick still couldn't shake the rage and hurt digging nails into his heart. He hadn't given George a proper goodbye. Then again, what was the point? George had Philza to protect him, so the engineer wouldn't get so much as a scratch on his pretty face.

Or maybe George would end up being the fucking hero that saved the day.

Nick shook his head viciously, casting away his dark thoughts. He'd see George again soon. The only reason Nick had come down to the tarmac was standing at the bottom of the steps, tucked into the shadows.

Tommy and Tubbo stood close, heads together. Nick couldn't see Tubbo's face clearly, but he heard both padawans, and that was all he needed.

If Nick couldn't help Clay, then he was damn well going to keep Tubbo safe.

“I'll be back soon,” Tommy promised quietly. “Dream and Techno are probably just hiding like cowards. We'll be back before you know it.”

“They aren't hiding, Tommy,” Tubbo responded, just as quietly. The padawan's shoulders hunched. “I don't need you to make me feel better or anything. I trust Philza and Wilbur more than I do you.”

“That's very rude.”

Both of them fell quiet. From his limited vantage point, Nick watched as Tommy visibly deflated.

“Are you sure you'll be alright, big man?” the blond boy asked. Tommy's voice was almost too soft for Nick to make out. “I mean... I don't have to go. I can tell Wilbur that the deal's off, and he was a fucking idiot for volunteering me in the first place. I can stay.”

Tubbo immediately put his hands out. “That's the stupidest thing you've ever said,” the brown-haired boy muttered. “No, you *have* to go.”

Tommy shuffled from foot to foot for a moment before hopefully suggesting, “You could come with us. We've got the space.”

A wave of terror swept from Tubbo like a tsunami. Nick had to physically steady himself against the pillar, and below, Tommy's face twisted in a wince. *That was a strong reaction*, Nick thought, narrowing his eyes at the back of Tubbo's head. *A little too strong. Even Tommy isn't that scared of the Underworld, and he's the one going down there.*

"I can't go with you," Tubbo babbled. "I- I would only slow you down, and I really don't think that you-"

"Hey, hey, calm down," Tommy murmured, much like one would to a skittish horse. If the frown creasing the padawan's face was any indication, he was just as worried as Nick was. "It's okay. You don't have to go. I just thought that you might want to."

Tubbo nodded too many times. "Okay. Okay, good. Thank you."

"Yeah. Of course."

"Tommy!"

The sudden shout startled Nick, and he glanced up sharply. Philza and Wilbur were alone on the tarmac, the rest of the Jedi having seemingly left, and the taller of the pair was watching Tommy and Tubbo with fond exasperation.

"Hurry up!" Wilbur continued, not quite shouting. "The sun is going to rise any minute!"

"That doesn't mean anything for us, does it?" Tommy bellowed back. "Give me a fucking second!" Wilbur rolled his eyes, and Tommy turned back to Tubbo with a slight grin. "Prick. Thinks the world revolves around him and his wants, eh? He's lucky he has me around to keep him in check."

"Lucky," Tubbo repeated dryly. "That's just the word I was thinking of."

Though the padawans' conversation had regained its former teasing air, tension still floated between them. Tubbo's shoulders were a little too tight, and lines of worry ringed Tommy's eyes. The two boys muttered something, clapped each other on the shoulders, then went their separate ways. Tommy strode towards the ship, Tubbo slunk into the shadows.

Nick kept his gaze focused on Tubbo.

There was something wrong with the padawan. Obviously, Tubbo's Master was missing (*And possibly dead*, Nick's brain supplied cheerfully), but it ran deeper than that. The padawan's Force presence was infused with fear. Tubbo's eyes darted nervously around the tarmac, even though its only occupants were the departing rescue team.

What weighed so heavily on Tubbo's mind, Nick almost didn't want to know. But, for the brown-haired boy's sake, Nick was willing to ask a few difficult questions.

The ship lifted off the tarmac, and within a few moments, it disappeared into Coruscant traffic. In a couple of hours, the party would be in the Underworld, beginning their search for Clay and Techno. Nick swallowed the bitterness coating his throat and glanced at Tubbo once again.

The padawan stood frozen. He'd shoved his hands into the sleeves of his robes, and his icy eyes were fixed on a point somewhere in another dimension.

Time to move before someone noticed Tubbo's distress.

Nick slid from the shadows and hurried down the steps, trying his best to make no noise. Not for

the first time, Nick longed to have the Sleepy Boys' talent for silent travel. It was a gods-damned gift (and had the extra benefit of being really fucking creepy).

The closer he got to Tubbo, the clearer Nick felt the padawan's turmoil. Tubbo *really* needed support. "Hey," Nick called once he'd gotten close. Tubbo cast his gaze around wildly, and Nick winced at the reaction. "Whoa, whoa, it's just me. What are you still doing out here? They're gone."

Nick had been trying for a teasing and light-hearted tone, but Tubbo's shoulders only slumped further. Again, Nick frowned at his incorrect choice.

"I know," Tubbo mumbled. "I must have looked really stupid just standing here. How'd you see me?"

Nick froze, desperately wracking his brain for a convincing lie. Finally, he said, "I was watching from the Temple. Pretty easy to see everyone."

Tubbo tilted his head slightly. "I thought you were busy," the padawan said, and a spark of life rekindled in his eyes. "Or you would have said goodbye to George."

"We already said our goodbyes," Nick said dismissively. Close enough to the truth. "Okay, come on."

Nick grabbed Tubbo's sleeve and dragged the padawan back up the steps, ignoring the boy's protests. Only once Nick had gotten them both back into the safety of the Temple did he release the captive padawan.

"What was all that for?" Tubbo demanded, making a show of rubbing his wrist (even though Nick hadn't even touched it). "I'm not gonna *throw* myself off the tarmac or something."

Nick smiled thinly. "I'm not a fucking idiot, Tubbo."

For a split second, panic flashed through Tubbo's eyes. "What?" the boy croaked.

That wasn't what Nick had expected. Clearly, there was more to Tubbo's unspoken worries than the padawan wanted to admit. But it wasn't the time or place for those questions. "You're in danger," Nick continued, watching for Tubbo's reaction. "I'm not letting you out of my sight until Dream and Techno are back safe and sound."

Relief. That was what flashed through Tubbo's eyes and eased the wear on the boy's face. Just as quickly, a feeble attempt at disinterest covered it, but Nick knew what he'd seen. Tubbo wanted to be protected.

But from what?

"S'alright," Tubbo said, slurring the words together in a blatant attempt at apathy. "You don't need to--"

Nick interrupted the padawan with a raised hand. "Tubbo," he chuckled. "I'm not taking 'no' for an answer. I mean, c'mon. Who's left? Just you and me."

Tubbo's face fell, and belatedly, Nick realized he might have been a little too direct with that comment.

"I mean, Eret's still here," Tubbo said quietly. "He's on our side, right?"

Nick hesitated.

*You're my safest bet.*

*If Delphina gets close to you again, tell me, okay? She won't hurt you on my watch.*

*Here's everything I could find. You can keep it all.*

There was always the chance that Eret was lying about everything. After all, since their very first meeting, Eret had proven himself to be incredibly intelligent and creative. But gods-damn it, Nick just wanted *someone* to count on, regardless of the shit going down. And besides... Eret had saved him.

“Yeah,” Nick muttered eventually. “Eret's on our side. I guess that means Rhodys is, too.” A smile softened the lines on Tubbo's face, and Nick heaved a quiet sigh. Crisis momentarily averted. “Come on, kid,” he said, starting down the hallway once again. “We're getting your shit. Have you been staying with Dream or in the padawan quarters?”

Tubbo shot him a curious look. “Why do we need my things?” the brown-haired boy asked suspiciously. “Where am I going?”

Nick chuckled a little, and he reached out to ruffle the shorter boy's hair. “Dream has taken you up to the Hideout, right?” Tubbo's eyes lit up. “Yeah, we're spending the day up there. It's warm, and honestly, it's the most secluded spot in this whole Temple. No one will know we're there.”

“Okay!” Tubbo chirped. The padawan's demeanor had done a complete 180, and suddenly, the boy was basically skipping down the hallway.

Nick couldn't blame him. In times like these, moments of joy and light were a rare commodity.

The two made quick time to Dream's room (where Tubbo had been camped out for three days). Once there, Tubbo unlocked the door and slipped inside, immediately heading for a blanket fort in the corner. Nick grinned at the fort, but he made no comment. Knowing Clay, the Jedi Master had probably helped Tubbo make it when the padawan had first asked to stay the night

Clay. Gods.

Everything in the room twisted Nick's stomach into bleeding knots. The shelves were decorated with knickknacks and keepsakes, and even the throw pillows scattered across the sofa were various shades of green. Nick had no clue how Clay had managed to get away with breaking several Code violations. But it warmed Nick's heart to see so much personality.

Something clouded at Nick's vision. He swiped a finger under his eyes and found, to his horror, tears staining his cheeks. Tubbo couldn't see him *cry*. The brown-haired boy needed sturdy support, not someone who was as broken and nervous as terrified as he was.

Which Nick *wasn't*. He was just... worried. Clay was in a lot of danger, and though Philza had said that he felt Techno, that left a lot open-ended when it came to Clay.

It was ironic, really. Tubbo was only two years younger than him. What was Nick doing, trying to play Master for a kid who could easily be his little brother?

“Nick, hey.”

Nick flinched and looked around. His eyes immediately landed on Eret, who was striding down the

hallway towards him.

“Eret,” Nick returned evenly. “What's up?”

Eret said nothing as he approached the doorway, and once he reached Nick's side, the Jedi Master peered into the room. For a second, Nick was tempted to push Eret away. Then a small smile creased the Jedi Master's tired face.

“You're getting Tubbo out of the Temple?” Eret asked quietly.

Nick carefully considered his options before he spoke. “Not exactly. Just getting him out of this room. Seriously, what's going on? Did Delphina make a move?”

Eret straightened from his leaned position. “No, she's been silent,” he murmured. “But I do have something for you.”

The Jedi Master opened his left fist and revealed a small communicator. For a reason he couldn't put his finger on, Nick didn't like the look of the device. But Eret hadn't stabbed him in the back thus far, so Nick gingerly accepted the communicator and tucked it into his pocket.

“What is it?” Nick asked.

“Communicator.”

“I know *that*. Who has the other lines?”

“Just one other line. Philza has it.”

Nick did an actual double-take. “Philza?” he repeated incredulously. Eret nodded, and Nick scoffed lightly. “I wonder how you two pulled that one off.” A grin tipped Eret's mouth, and Nick shot the Jedi Master an annoyed look. “Are you going to brag about how sneaky you are now?”

“No,” Eret cut in, giving Nick a mild glare in response. “That was from Cho-Nal. I didn't do anything.”

The communicator in Nick's pocket suddenly felt as heavy as a beating human heart. Repulsion and anger surged through Nick's chest in an uncontrollable wave, and he dug his hand into his pocket, already preparing to crush the communicator underneath his heel.

Eret grabbed his wrist.

“Don't you dare,” Nick snarled. He yanked his hand out of Eret's grasp. “You gave me something from *Cho-Nal*, and you really expected me to be okay with it?”

Eret's eyes flashed dangerously, and Nick was hit by sudden nerves. “I know it's a fucked situation,” Eret said lowly, and again, the hint of a threat made Nick shudder. “But unless you want to give up the only secure channel to Philza and the rest, I'd suggest you keep that. If not for yourself-” Eret glanced into Clay's room again, and his frown melted away. “-then do it for Tubbo. He needs to talk to his family.”

Hollow regret enveloped Nick's anger in an all-encompassing wave. He reluctantly pulled his hand from his pocket, and at Eret's approving glance, looked away guiltily. Nick hadn't thought of Tubbo at all, only the rage he associated with Cho-Nal.

“Oh, hello, Master Eret!”

Tubbo had looked up from shoving clothes into a bag and was waving cheerfully at Eret. Eret smiled and waved back.

“Morning, Tubbo,” the Jedi Master said lightly. “Did you have breakfast yet?”

Tubbo glanced at Nick with something of a hesitant expression. Nick inclined his head slightly. “No, I haven’t,” Tubbo admitted. “I just woke up to see the party off. I might skip breakfast today, to be honest.”

Eret stepped back from the room and raised an eyebrow at Nick. “Where are you taking him?”

“Hideout,” Nick muttered. He’d trusted Eret this far. Might as well go a little further. “I’m going to keep him up there until everyone gets back. I don’t care if the traitor is Delphina, you, or someone else. I *will* keep him safe.”

A knowing smile pulled at Eret’s mouth. “You’re trusting me quite a bit, given that I’m a suspect in your eyes,” the Jedi Master noted.

Nick shrugged. “Yeah, well... I can’t do this by myself.”

“I understand that. Alright, since you’re getting Tubbo away, I’ll see if anyone goes looking for him. Delphina might slip up if she thinks the plan changed.”

“Sure.”

Nick had absolutely no intention of letting his guard down and allowing Eret to do all the work. However, insight into the Jedi Master’s mind was invaluable. If things were truly fucked and Eret turned out to be a traitor, Nick would at least learn who Eret planned to be the fall guy.

“I’m ready!”

Tubbo pulled the drawstrings of his bag, then hurried over to Nick and Eret with a bright grin. The expression warmed Nick’s heart, and he managed to give Eret a genuine smile.

“We’ll see you later, Eret,” Nick said.

Eret inclined his head with a matching smile. “Will do.”

Nick gently guided Tubbo away from the Jedi Master, which felt stranger than Nick had expected. He was little more than a padawan himself, but taking on the role of substitute Master came naturally to him. Maybe he’d just known Tubbo long enough to be comfortable.

After a brief walk, the two of them exited the Temple and swung around the back wall. Tubbo strutted along with evident confidence, and Nick raised an eyebrow.

“You remember the way?” he asked.

A shy smile touched Tubbo’s face. “Yeah,” the padawan admitted. “I haven’t gone back up there since so much has been going on, but it was nice. It was nice to talk to Dream, too. I wish-”

Tubbo cut himself off, and the boy’s face creased with misery. Nick’s heart squeezed. *The gods haven’t been kind to you*, he thought wearily, slinging an arm around Tubbo’s shoulders and pulling the padawan against his side. Tubbo went without complaint. *You deserve better than this. Clay should be here, and I shouldn’t be hiding you on top of the Temple. You should have had a normal life.*

But no matter what Nick thought or prayed, Tubbo's hand had already been dealt. At the very least, the padawan seemed to be making the best of the cards he had.

A few minutes later, Nick and Tubbo reached the hidden ladder. Nick launched himself from handhold to handhold, clambered onto the rooftop, then reached out to Tubbo. The padawan caught his hand on the last jump.

“Always miss that,” Tubbo gasped, face pale.

Nick grinned widely. “Honestly, I think Dream designed it that way. He was a devious little shit when he was a padawan.”

Tubbo mumbled something under his breath, and Nick allowed himself a quiet laugh. Even with everything going on, Tubbo had the time to critique his Master's lackluster architecture.

They made their way around towering chimneys and slippery drop-offs (why did the Temple have so many slopes?) and slowly advanced towards their destination. Finally, Nick rounded a corner and was met with the sight of the Hideout gleaming in the morning sun. Nick smiled faintly. He'd missed it up here. Ever since George's exile, Nick hadn't been able to come back up. It had felt... sacrilegious.

“Okay, settle in,” Nick ordered, waving a hand at Tubbo. The padawan did immediately, dropping his bag and pulling several compact blankets from its depths. “You came prepared,” Nick noted. He had to admit, he was impressed.

“Of course,” the brown-haired boy chirped, shooting him a bright grin. “If I don't have blankets, then it's impossible to really be comfortable.”

Nick couldn't argue with that logic. He helped Tubbo arrange a blanket nest, then stole one of the smaller blankets for himself. In an hour or so, Nick would get up, head back into the Temple, and continue his efforts to expose the traitor. But until then, he could rest.

Fifteen minutes passed in comfortable silence. But, as Nick expected, Tubbo couldn't stay quiet for long.

“Do you come up here a lot, Sapnap?” the padawan asked. “I don't always see you around the Temple.”

Nick chuckled to himself. “No, I haven't been here in years,” he murmured. “Not since George left. I think you need glasses if you don't see me around.”

Tubbo made an offended noise at the jab, and Nick prayed that the distraction was enough to keep Tubbo from reading deeper into his explanation. Nick knew he was good at disappearing into the background. It seemed to be what people expected of him: he was only called on when needed.

Or, sometimes, not at all.

“So, you, George, and Dream used to hang out up here?”

“Yeah,” Nick said wistfully. “Those were better times. I know that makes me sound old, but—”

“You're not old,” Tubbo interrupted with a slight scoff. Nick suddenly remembered that, oh yeah, he wasn't that much older than Tubbo. “Besides, I wouldn't mind turning time back a couple of years. It was more peaceful then.”



Nick gave a noncommittal hum and fixed his eyes on the distant Temple gates. He didn't want to go back, exactly. But the time before George's exile did seem so sweet compared to the past four and a half years. Life as a padawan had been simpler... kinder.

And Nick sounded old. Wonderful.

A presence suddenly touched Nick's mind, startling him from his gloomy thoughts. It burned golden and warm, enveloping him like a hug from the sun itself.

Nick knew the presence like the back of his hand. "Hey, Bad!" he called over his shoulder, twisting to search for his friend. Sure enough, Bad was wandering over to them, crossing the Temple roof from the direction of the cliffs. A brilliant smile spread over the daemon's face.

"Good morning, you two!" Bad greeted. The daemon stepped onto the Hideout and settled himself next to Nick, his thin tail curling around his shoulders. Nick offered Bad a corner of the blanket, and the daemon instantly accepted it, scooting closer to him. Bad radiated warmth like a sun. "What are you doing up? It's early!"

"We're hiding," Tubbo said, as cheerful as ever

One of Bad's eyebrows lifted slightly. "Hiding?"

Bad's accusatory look slid to Nick, and Nick raised his hands defensively. "I wasn't fighting with anyone," he protested. "I just want to keep Tubbo out of harm's way."

"Hmm." Bad leaned forward, and the daemon grinned warmly at Tubbo. "So I'm guessing that you like it up here."

Tubbo's face lit up. "Yeah. It's really nice."

Bad asked the padawan a question about the view, and Nick half-heard Tubbo's reply. But as soon as the daemon took over the conversation, Nick's mind slipped from the Temple and plummeted straight down, following Philza and the others into the Underworld.

Nick should be on that ship. He should be allowed to help his friends and not have to sneak around pretending to be clueless.

He should be there to help George.

Nick regretted leaving things the way he had. It had only been a couple of hours, and already, the all-too-familiar ache of despair and loneliness swirled in his gut. The feeling had haunted Nick for months after George's exile. Why had he thought that the engineer's departure this time would be any easier?

What if George decided not to come back? He might disappear into the Underworld again and be free to live his life. Nick certainly hadn't given him any reasons to stay.

A ball wedged itself in Nick's throat, choking him with all the emotions that he'd never let go of the first time around. What if George left again? It'd be so much worse because this time... it would be of his own volition. It would be proof that George wanted to leave everything and everyone behind. Including Nick.

A gentle touch landed on Nick's wrist.

Panic lit up Nick's nerves like a neon sign, and he jerked away from the contact. The hand let him

do so, and slowly, Nick remembered that Bad was sitting next to him. The daemon hadn't paused his conversation with Tubbo, but a flicker of concern danced in Bad's eyes.

*Are you okay?*

Nick tried for a smile. He was terrible at projecting his thoughts, so he opted to tap the back of Bad's hand. The daemon immediately settled his grip around Nick's right wrist. The runes on his other wrist began to burn with Bad's trademark amber magic. The peace and serenity that Bad exuded quickly lulled Nick towards the darkness of sleep, and he couldn't find the energy to stay awake. After all... he hadn't been sleeping well in recent days.

Vaguely, Nick was aware of Bad and Tubbo having an animated conversation about plant anatomy. Nick smiled at his friends' antics and tucked his head against Bad's shoulder. The daemon ran a gentle hand through his hair.

Nick could take a quick nap. Bad wouldn't let anything happen to Tubbo while he was asleep.

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Clay swore as he stumbled his own feet. Techno caught him before he could topple onto his face, but the brief interruption had destroyed their cadence. Clay grit his teeth as they painfully resumed their shambling shuffle.

Having a twisted ankle had never been more annoying. Before, Clay would slap a bacta patch on it and be ready to go in a couple of hours. Now, he was reduced to using Techno as a makeshift crutch.

That wasn't to say that Techno was unhelpful. Without the pig Jedi, Clay knew that he'd already be dead.

The bog wasn't lethal, exactly. As far as Clay and Techno had seen, there weren't any man-eating plants or ferocious predators, and the air wasn't toxic (at least, not to their knowledge). However, time completely eluded them. Clay had no way of knowing how long they'd been walking or even how far they'd gone (he'd dropped his stick after it had grown too heavy to hold). The lack of time would solely erode their sanity.

And, of course, there was the slight issue of food and water.

In a stroke of divine providence, Clay and Techno had stumbled upon a rushing river. It was too wide to cross, but it provided them with fresh water. So far, it hadn't poisoned them, and it was vital they avoided dehydration. They couldn't afford any setbacks.

Food was still scarce. Techno had nibbled on a couple of leaves from a healthy-looking plant, but the pig Jedi had immediately spat them out and moved on without comment. Clay had decided against arguing.

Clay craned his neck back and gazed up at the distant ceiling of the cave. They had no way of proving the notion. But Techno had posed the idea, and it seemed reasonable (especially after seeing how fertile Kan Bo Salem's cave had been). Still, the thought was almost unfeasible. How could a cave be so monstrously large?

More than that, how had no one ever noticed a gigantic cavern buried deep in the Underworld?

“Dream, stay with me.”

Clay snapped guiltily out of his thoughts. Techno had brought them to a stop, and the pig Jedi eyed him worriedly.

"I'm here," Clay said weakly. "What is it?"

"I asked if you wanted to stop. You feeling okay?"

Clay wasn't at all. Techno seemed to have adjusted to the haze of Force power that choked them, but Clay's head still felt cloudy and muddled – like he was looking at the world through a sheet of mist.

"I'm fine," Clay said aloud. He was lying through his teeth, and judging by Techno's frown, the other man knew it. But they needed time to be on their side, so Clay added, "Seriously. I can go a few more hours."

Techno smiled wanly. "You know I can't hold you to that."

Clay shrugged and hoped he could get away with his vague answer. Eventually, Techno continued their painstakingly slow shuffle. Clay longed to run on his ankle and damn the consequences, but he knew what would happen if he tried: he would collapse and slow them down even more.

Something pricked at the back of Clay's neck. He stiffened and glanced over his shoulder, scanning the hazy landscape. Nothing.

Techno had mentioned seeing hallucinations. More than once, Clay had caught the pig Jedi staring off into the distance with a hollow gaze, eyes wide and face pale. Clay hadn't seen anything yet.

But it was only a matter of time. Clay was starting to hear voices, carried to his ears by a nonexistent wind. Sometimes, he heard Tubbo's laughter. Other times, it was cries of encouragement from Nick or warm praise from Bad. Why he heard positive things as opposed to negative ones, Clay didn't know. He wasn't complaining, though. Clay created enough negative in his head by himself.

Every hour or so, Clay tried to reach Tubbo through the bank of fog that separated them. Every time, he was met by the same infuriating results – static and a headache.

Clay glanced at Techno again. The other man was concentrating on the treacherous ground, which was probably what Clay should be doing. But his curiosity was too strong to ignore.

"Techno?" Clay asked hesitantly. The pig Jedi grunted in response. "Can you feel Philza?"

"No," came the instant response. A pause. Then: "Eh... I mean, kinda. There are places where the fog isn't that thick, and his presence pokes through. But I'm pretty sure he's reaching out for me, too, so. Makes it easier for both of us."

"Why can't I feel Tubbo?" Clay murmured. He felt pathetic asking Techno questions that the pig Jedi couldn't answer, but they'd spoken a lot of things during their journey. Conversation wasn't as awkward as it had originally been.

Techno was silent for a moment. Then the other man heaved a weary sigh, and Clay frowned at how exhausted his companion sounded. "I'm gonna be honest with you, Dream," Techno said tiredly. "I'm using everything I've got to stay connected to Phil. He and I are two Jedi Masters that are actively searching for each other, and our bond is barely holding on. You shouldn't be too worried that you can't feel your teenage padawan."

Clay hadn't thought about it that way. He mumbled a "thanks," and Techno again grunted.

They were getting worse, Clay could tell. Neither of them had said much in recent hours, half out of pain, half out of fatigue. They needed to eat.

"We need something more substantial than leaves," Clay sighed aloud. "Or we won't be able to keep going."

Techno hummed in response, and Clay hoped that meant that the pig Jedi agreed. Unfortunately, Clay had seen nothing that could act as a proper meal. The only vegetations that grew were strange plants and riverbank reeds.

Strangely enough, Clay hadn't seen any animals in all the time they'd been walking – not even bugs.

Finally, Techno brought them to a stop next to a small inlet. The pig Jedi carefully lowered Clay onto a log, then stumbled down to the shoreline. Clay watched with a heavy heart. The other man had been keeping them alive from the start. Now, in the heart of this marshland, Clay couldn't help but feel guilty at how much he was slowing Techno down.

"You should have escaped already, you know," Clay noted once Techno returned from the river. The pig Jedi shot him a confused look, and Clay sighed quietly. "You know what I'm talking about."

"I'm not gonna leave you here," Techno said placidly. Despite the other man's blank expression and monotone, a spark of fire burned in his eyes. "I don't think you'd stay sane down here. Besides, I'd literally never find you again."

Logically, Clay knew that Techno's reasoning was sound. But his ankle hurt, his head throbbed, and any chances of escape were as slim as the reeds drifting in the absent breeze. Being lost forever in the marshland didn't sound so bad. Clay inhaled to tell Techno as much. But before he could say anything, the pig Jedi stiffened, staring at a point over Clay's shoulder.

"Dream, turn around," Techno commanded. "Do you see anyone standing over there?"

Shivers crawled up Clay's spine. He did as Techno ordered and twisted on his makeshift seat. The rough trail they'd been following was devoid of life... there weren't even any plants in the near vicinity.

"No," Clay said slowly. "What do you see?"

For a moment, Techno didn't say anything. Slowly, painfully, the pig Jedi met Clay's gaze. "I guess it's all in my head," Techno muttered. "Ra-Lune's been following us around since I woke up. It's just a little disconcerting, you know how it is. Don't worry about it."

The strain in Techno's jaw told a very different story. Clay eyed the place on Techno's belt where the pig Jedi's lightsaber usually sat, and nerves drove into the back of his skull. He'd never asked about Ra-Lune. But, given that this was life and death for them... it might be time to pry.

"Does Ra-Lune do anything?" Clay asked. "Like... does she threaten you or anything?"

Techno's glance was wary. "Why does it matter?"

"With all the shit that's going on down here, I wouldn't be surprised if your hallucinations come to life. I want to know how much danger I'm in."

Techno shrugged, and Clay held his breath. He knew next to nothing about Ra-Lune. Once, Clay had tried to bring her up with Philza, but the Jedi Master had shut him down with nothing more than a glare.

Eventually, Techno sighed. "I mean, she's my old Master," the pig Jedi muttered. "And she taught me most of what I know. So, I guess how worried you should be depends on how dangerous you think I am."

"Techno," Clay groaned.

"Look, Dream, I don't know what you want me to say. Ra-Lune is supposed to be dead, but she's still drifting around whispering about how *I* kept her alive. Maybe it's a Sith practice that we never knew about! I don't know!"

Clay opened his mouth to snap that Techno should know *something*; he had been her padawan, right? But then, the surface of the river rippled. Clay froze.

"What? What is it?"

"Techno, look," Clay ordered. He hated how his voice trembled. The pig Jedi did so, then immediately scrambled to his feet. "You see that, too?"

"Yeah," Techno muttered, already holding out a hand. Clay accepted the help and allowed the other man to haul them both a step backward. Whatever qualms Clay had had about being touched had long since vanished into the fog. "Okay, either we're both officially insane, or that's a really, *really* big thing. Grab my shirt."

Clay fisted his left hand in Techno's tunic. The pig Jedi began hobbling them away from the river, panic evident in his heaving breaths. Clay could feel his heartbeat loud in his ears, and his legs struggled to keep up with Techno's hurried pace. If the river monster caught up to them-

Something latched onto Clay's injured foot.

One second, Clay leaned on Techno as they scrambled away from the river. The next, land and green haze were mixing together in a nauseating kaleidoscope of colors. Clay blinked once, twice, then realized that he was sailing through the air. Panic replaced his complacent confusion in a sickening heartbeat.

*Where's the ground?* Clay thought desperately. Gods, he was going to be sick. If this kept up, he wouldn't-

There. A patch of mossy green amongst the whirlpool. Clay twisted his body and prayed for a safe landing.

It was excruciating. Clay's left ankle collapsed under his body weight, and shards of molten glass drove through his foot, toppling him to the side. Clay gasped in pain, eyes watering. Okay, that had not gone well. He couldn't even stand, let alone fight off whatever had snatched him.

Fight. *Techno*.

Clay shook his head fiercely, using the pain to clear his mind. Once he could finally see straight again, Clay looked around desperately.

Techno stood on the opposite bank, hands raised defensively against-

*Oh, gods... what the fuck is that?*

A serpentine creature loomed over Techno, flaps of skin on its neck flaring out like a cobra's. Its torso towered at least a full body length taller than Clay, and the creature's mouth was wide enough to swallow either of them in one mammoth gulp.

Clay instinctively reached for his lightsaber. It wasn't there. *Shit, shit, shit*, Clay thought frantically, and for a moment, he was struck with terrible *deja vu*. This had happened only a few days previous. He'd fallen into a trap, defenseless and injured. Only, this time, Clay didn't even have the Force to help him. It was just him and Techno against this ravenous predator.

"You okay, Dream?" Techno bellowed.

"I'm fine!" Clay shouted back. "How do we stop this thing?"

"How am I supposed to know?!"

The serpent hissed, and Clay backed away from the river. He only remembered the unfortunate condition of his ankle once he crumpled to the ground. Through the sheen of pain that clouded his eyes, Clay watched, horrified, as Techno took a step towards the monster.

"Alright, Dream, listen!" The pig Jedi paused as the serpent hissed again. "I'm going to force this thing underwater, then I'll jump over there! We'll take off in that direction! Ready?"

Clay's head buzzed like an angry beetle, but he nodded. "Ready!" he called. His voice sounded ragged, even to his own ears.

"I'll count us down! One, two, three!"

Nothing happened.

Then Techno screamed.

It was a horrible, shrill sound. The pig Jedi dropped to his knees, red eyes bulging as he cradled his head in his hands. The sight made Clay feel nauseous.

"Techno!" Clay shouted desperately. The other man didn't move. "*Techno! Get the fuck up!*" As if directly influenced by Clay's goading, Techno toppled to the side and collapsed. Primal fear sunk into Clay's bones.

Techno couldn't die. He- he couldn't die.

The serpent made a noise like laughter and advanced on the downed Jedi, neck flaps flaring.

Clay didn't know what had happened. He didn't even know if Techno was alive. But, at that moment, Clay was sure of one thing: he would *not* let Techno die in this wretched prison.

With all the effort of pushing a boulder, Clay clambered to his feet. He balanced on one leg and was blind in both eyes, but Clay felt the serpent clear as day. It was malicious, famished, and sadistic. It knew that Techno was in pain and relished the smell.

Anger burned a hole through Clay's self-control.

"Stay away from him!" Clay bellowed. He reached for the Force as he'd done so many times and urged it to save his companion- no. His friend.

It shouldn't have worked. The Force hadn't reacted to either of their calls thus far, and being in a life-or-death situation shouldn't have had any bearing. But it did. The Force power inside Clay ignited, and suddenly, he had complete control over the serpent. Clay heaved a sigh of relief, then snapped the serpent's neck.

It didn't go quite as planned.

What Clay wanted to do was kill the beast in one clean blow. However, all his hazy mind could manage was dragging the serpent to his side of the river. The creature howled in frustration. Panic turned Clay's mind into a blank slate, and he dumbly released his hold. As soon as he did, the serpent's gaping mouth plowed towards him.

Clay's body reacted before his brain even caught up. When Clay blinked, finally aware of his surroundings, he found himself pinned against a low hill. Both of the serpent's fangs had driven into his mask. Clay let out a horrified gasp, recoiling from the poison that was slowly sliding towards the eyeholes.

His life or the mask?

*Gods-damn it*, Clay thought frantically, and he unbuckled his mask. Clay dropped from the serpent's grasp, and the beast howled. He had about two seconds before a second attempt on his life was made – how was he going to kill this thing?

Soft skin under the serpent's chin. A loose scale on its chest.

A plan.

Clay dove for the loose scale. He wrenched it free, which immediately drove the serpent's fury up several notches, then sprinted back to his hiding spot directly beneath the serpent's mouth. Clay offered a silent apology to whatever gods were listening, then called on the Force and plunged the sharpened end of the scale upwards.

The beast's lusty wail came to an abrupt stop. Ever so slowly, it began to wilt, sinking halfway into the river. Clay scurried backward and found the serpent's eyes completely blank. Its mouth leaked blood.

*I shouldn't have done that*, Clay thought miserably. Already, the guilt at killing such a beautiful creature tore at his heart, and Clay knew that his chest would ache for the next day or two. But at least Techno was still alive.

Wait, gods, *Techno*. Was the pig Jedi still alive?

Clay's Force power was rapidly deteriorating. He grit his teeth, then pumped his arms and hurled himself at the other riverbank with his last remaining spark. Clay scrabbled for purchase on the dried mud, and his injured ankle splashed the water as he landed. But it got him across.

Techno hadn't moved. The pig Jedi's eyes were closed, and his arms splayed at awkward angles.

Clay dropped to his knees next to the other man. "Techno?" he muttered. No response. Clay pressed his fingers to the other man's wrist and was relieved to be met by a steady pulse. "Alright, Techno. Philza will tear me apart if I don't get you out of here alive, so you've gotta wake up. Stay with me, okay?"

Several torturous minutes ticked by, and Clay kept up his running stream of commentary. Though it did nothing to wake Techno, it kept him completely falling apart. Techno had to be okay. The pig

Jedi had survived much worse than one fucking river serpent.

Finally, Techno's eyelids fluttered.

Clay inhaled deeply. "There you are," he murmured, and he couldn't stop a giddy smile from crossing his face. "It's me, Techno. You... you kinda passed out. I thought you'd died."

"It feels like I did," Techno hissed. The other man's eyes narrowed in the dim light of the cavern, and his arms twitched slightly. "Gods, everything hurts. Dream... I can't move. I can barely see you."

Clay put a firm hand on Techno's shoulder, just in case the pig Jedi tried to sit up. "Just stay there," he ordered quietly. "You shouldn't push yourself."

Techno didn't argue.

The two of them sat there for a few minutes. Despite the many questions bouncing around Clay's head, he refused to verbalize any of them. If he broke the silence... maybe Techno would disappear. Maybe the other man was already dead, and Clay's broken mind just refused to accept that possibility.

Hah. Wouldn't that be the cherry on top?

Finally, Techno broke the silence.

"Where's your mask?"

Clay touched his face instinctively, and he grimaced as he remembered, oh yeah, he didn't have his mask anymore. "Lost it in the fight," Clay said stiffly. "It was me or the mask."

"I see."

The pig Jedi eyed him curiously, but Clay noticed that Techno's eyes weren't following any of his worst scars. Instead, the other man seemed to be getting a feel for Clay's face, much like one would a new house. At least Techno wasn't outwardly judgmental.

It took almost ten more minutes before Techno spoke again. The brief silence felt like an eternity to Clay.

"I couldn't use the Force," Techno muttered. "I tried to, and... that happened."

Clay swallowed thickly. "Sounded like you were dying," he said, trying for a light-hearted tone. It didn't work.

"Yeah."

"But it doesn't make any sense. Don't you have to use the Force to connect to Philza and all that?"

"I mean, *I* thought so. Maybe there are some cosmic rules that no one ever told me about."

Clay snorted at the thought, but tension still crowded the back of his mind. They could speculate all they wanted, but ultimately, they were forced to play by whatever shitty rules this brutal marshland dictated. It was the only way to survive.

"Hey, Dream?"



Techno's eyes had fluttered shut, and Clay barely managed to keep his hands from shaking at the sight. *Techno can't die. He can't. I won't be able to make it out of here by myself-*

"Yeah?" Clay croaked.

"I think I need to rest for a sec before we keep moving."

"Okay. No problem."

"At least we have food now."

"I guess so."

Clay spent the next three hours in mute terror. He only breathed easy once Techno opened his eyes again.

---

Eret watched the courtyard with narrowed eyes and laser-intense focus. To an outsider, he probably looked stuffy and unamused – which was precisely what Eret wanted. His short speech at the task force had revealed his aims to most of the Order, but news hadn't yet made its way through the rumor mill. Eret could still pass as traditional.

Sometimes, Eret questioned the morality of being double-faced. But, ultimately, his mental dissonance didn't matter as much as the future of the Order. Eret was willing to bear the burden of being dishonest to help his fellows and all the future Jedi.

After all, Eret's current mission wasn't even the shadiest thing he'd ever done.

A peal of laughter suddenly rose from a group of Jedi in the courtyard below. Among them was Delphina, who was Eret's subject of investigation. Following her beat-down (courtesy of Philza), the Jedi Master had been surprisingly complacent. She'd wandered around the Temple, gossiped with her friends, and done the bare minimum to assist the task force's investigation.

But Eret had never been one to judge an introverted nature. No, his concern stemmed from the darkness that squatted on Delphina's Force presence, snapping at everyone who dared reach for it.

In years past, Delphina had been a good Master, full of light and sympathy. Now, she seemed less interested in being a Jedi and more invested in the proceedings of royalty. Eret wasn't sure when Delphina had changed. But there was no denying that *something* was wrong.

Delphina suddenly laughed, flapping a hand at one of the other Jedi. The simple movement made Eret tense up. One day, Delphina would snap. One day, she would break this fake caricature and turn the Temple into a bonfire.

Eret didn't know what he was going to do when that happened.

"Hey, Eret."

*One deep breath. Stay focused. Don't let him see how tired you are, and don't let the probes slip.*

"Hey, Sappnap," Eret returned, turning to give the younger man a warm smile. Eret's smile became more genuine once he noticed the brown-haired shadow trailing Sappnap down the parapet. "I see we have an extra set of eyes."

Sappnap shrugged, and he ruffled Tubbo's hair. "Yeah, the kid needs something to do," the younger

man said absently.

"I'm almost 17-"

"Besides, I have to keep an eye on him," Sapnap continued, completely bowling over the padawan's protests. Sapnap shot Tubbo a teasing grin, which the brown-haired boy reluctantly returned. "Don't worry, he'll be useful."

"That's all I am to you," Tubbo griped. "A tool."

"Better than being *useless*, isn't it?"

"Is that supposed to make me feel better?"

Eret regarded the interaction with mild amusement. He'd never known Sapnap and Tubbo to be close, but then again, Eret didn't pretend to know the personal affairs of other Jedi. He was glad that the two had bonded. With any luck, it would make Tubbo less vulnerable to future attacks.

"You're both useful," Eret chuckled, cutting through the banter. "How good is your night vision, Tubbo?"

Tubbo frowned a little. "Not very," the padawan admitted. "I'm better during the day. Or the afternoon. Basically any time that isn't right now." Tubbo glanced at the sun, which was quickly setting behind the Temple, and he winced. "The sun is a bit blinding."

"Then don't look at it," Sapnap drawled.

Tubbo shot Sapnap a dirty look, and the Jedi Knight snickered. "Thanks, Sapnap. Really appreciate the advice."

Eret cleared his throat again, and his two companions fell silent. "We have a mission, gents," he said gently. "Come here." Eret led Sapnap and Tubbo to the edge of the parapet, then jerked his chin at Delphina and her assembled group. "We're following her tonight."

"Who's her?" Tubbo asked, clearly baffled. Understanding cleared away the confusion not a second later. "Delphina. Oh, gods-"

"We think she's the traitor," Sapnap muttered. "But we've got to have concrete evidence before we start pointing fingers. If our case isn't airtight, then she's probably going to try to pin the blame back on us."

Eret chuckled. "That's guaranteed to happen if I deliver our case."

Sapnap's expression morphed into one of guilt, but Eret waved a dismissive hand. He already knew that he wasn't a popular figure in the Order.

"So, why do you think it's Delphina?" Tubbo paused, chewing on his lip absently. "And what are *we* going to do?"

Eret glanced at Sapnap. The younger man gave him a wary look, and Eret nodded at Tubbo. *Do you want to tell him, or should I?*

Sapnap opened his mouth, closed it, then opened it again. Finally, the shorter man huffed and muttered aloud, "You tell him. I don't want to think about it too much."

Eret inclined his head and turned to Tubbo, who was looking between them with evident

confusion.

“What are you two on about?” the padawan asked hesitantly. “What happened?”

Eret smiled wanly. “I’ll give you the short version.”

---

*Eret strode down the hallway, searching for a familiar face amongst the crowd. Sapnap had asked to meet at 5 pm (to discuss Tubbo, of all people), and when the younger man had failed to arrive after a full half an hour, Eret had gone in search of the absent Knight. But Sapnap was nowhere to be found. And Eret was starting to get worried.*

*Dream and George were away. It was a perfect time to take the third member of Dream's old team out of the picture.*

*Eret swung around a corner and froze. Delphina and Sapnap stood next to a nearby bench, heads together as they talked. For a moment, Eret panicked.*

*Had Sapnap been a traitor this whole time? Eret had long since known that something was very, very off with Delphina, and her current descent into violence proved his theory. But Sapnap? Sapnap was just a good kid. Sapnap had broken the record for youngest Jedi Knight (in recent years, at least), and from what Eret had seen, the younger man was overall a nice person.*

*And, if Sapnap was a traitor... what did that mean for Sapnap's friends? Dream? Bad?*

*Then Delphina leaned forward, and Sapnap recoiled sharply, face twisted by barely concealed fear. Terror and rage rolled off the younger man in desperate waves.*

*Eret exhaled deeply. Okay. It wasn't Sapnap. Now he could intervene with a clear conscience.*

*“Excuse me, Master Delphina!” Eret shouted, striding towards the pair. Delphina whipped around, her eyes burning with hatred, and Sapnap's shoulders visibly slumped in relief. “Gods, Delphina, what's going on? You look murderous.”*

*“I am,” Delphina hissed in grating tones. “This bastard of a Jedi decided that he had the right to follow me around in a very suspicious manner! I am in danger! If I hadn't stopped him, he might have made an attempt on my life!”*

*Eret glanced at Sapnap, whose face still looked unusually ashen. Slowly, the younger man shook his head. Eret slid his gaze back to Delphina's frosty eyes.*

*“Listen, Delphina,” Eret muttered. He leaned closer to the shorter woman, and Delphina instantly took a step back. “I don't know how you stayed hidden for so long. Hell, I'll admit, you even had me fooled for a while. But all three of us know that you're the bad guy. I'd bet that if I hadn't interrupted just now, Sapnap would be fighting for his life. Don't insult us by playing dumb.”*

*For a moment, nothing happened.*

*Then Delphina's face stretched into a horrible smile. Her elegant features warped with smug satisfaction, and a glint of malicious pleasure flashed through her eyes. “Wonderful deduction, Eret,” Delphina chuckled. “Now prove it.”*

*With that, Delphina swept off down the walkway, tan robes billowing around her. Eret watched the Jedi Master until she disappeared into the Temple. Only then did he allow himself to breathe*

again.

*Well, that was one theory confirmed. But how to prove it to everyone else?*

*“Thanks, Eret. You're a lifesaver.”*

*Eret glanced back at Sapnap, and worry plucked his heart as he took in the Knight's shaking hands and hollow stare. “You alright?” he asked. “Did she hurt you?”*

*Sapnap's laugh was a bit unstable. “Did she do anything?” the Knight repeated, his words undercut by mania. “She pulled a knife on me, Eret. A fucking knife. She was hiding it in her sleeve, but she-” Sapnap's cheeks took on a sickly, green shade. “She threatened to gut me. Dump my body where no one would find it or just burn me alive. I-”*

*Sapnap began to tremble, and Eret took the younger man's arm, gently forcing them both onto the bench. Sapnap needed time to process what had just happened. Being threatened for the first time was a terrible experience, and Eret vividly recalled his first encounter with potential death. He'd been around Sapnap's age, too.*

*Finally, Sapnap took a sharp breath. “Yeah, Delphina's fucking insane,” the Knight muttered. “Even if she isn't the one behind everything, she's complicit. I think I would have died if you didn't show up.”*

*The Force works in mysterious ways, Eret thought wanly. “You aren't dead yet,” he noted. “Were you actually following her?”*

*“Yeah.” Sapnap's face colored in embarrassment. “I thought I was stealthy. I guess not.”*

*“Did she let anything slip?”*

*“Sorta. She's a traitor, but other than that... she's out for blood, that's obvious. But she didn't mention anything about her plans or accomplices or shit like that.”*

*Eret clicked his tongue. “That's too bad.”*

*The two of them sat in silence for a moment. Sapnap was still clearly in shock from having almost died, but Eret didn't have time to take care of him. He needed to follow up on other leads. With confirmed knowledge of Delphina's treachery, Eret had to start building his case. If Delphina destroyed her trail, Eret was going to be swept under the rug, ignored, or demoted for his insubordination.*

*Because, if he was honest... Eret knew he was one of a small faction that didn't trust Delphina. He was part of the minuscule minority that disliked the Council. It was an uphill battle all the way.*

*“Alright, listen,” Eret said, rising to his feet. “I know you're exhausted, so go back to your quarters and rest. We can talk tomorrow.”*

*Sapnap's face crumpled in relief. “Yeah,” the younger man mumbled. “Thanks.” Eret nodded and started to walk away, but then, Sapnap's voice rang out from behind him. “Wait! I was going to visit Tubbo tonight! Can- can you-”*

*Eret glanced over his shoulder and shot Sapnap a warm grin. “I'll check on him,” he promised.*

*Sapnap ducked his head, clearly embarrassed, and said nothing more. So Eret continued down the walkway, head filled with half-finished plans as his feet carried him towards Rhodys' office. The*

*Trandoshan Jedi had been more and more liberal in recent years. Perhaps Eret could get them to see what he saw.*

---

Tubbo's expression was caught somewhere between terror and repulsion. Sapnap looked no better, and the shorter man had even shuffled a couple of steps away while Eret had been relaying the story.

"R-really?" Tubbo stuttered. The padawan glanced at Sapnap, and his face paled further as he took in the Jedi Knight's condition. "Delphina- she-"

"Mhm." Eret didn't want Tubbo to repeat the story too many times. Sapnap was in poor shape as it was. "But there's the problem of it being our word against Delphina's. I'm sure other people have noticed and are worried, but our little sect is far outweighed by people who think we're all delusional. We need solid proof that she's a traitor."

Tubbo was silent for a long, long moment. Eret waited patiently. Finally, the padawan looked up with steel in his icy eyes, and Eret barely kept from smiling. The brown-haired boy had *finally* come back to life.

"I'll help," Tubbo hissed through gritted teeth, and his hands balled into fists. "She needs to be thrown in prison before someone dies."

"Amen to that," Sapnap chimed in. The Jedi Knight still looked ill, but much like Tubbo, there was a new spark of anger burning in his eyes. "There has to be *something*. Maybe she meets with a contact every night. Or maybe there's something in her room!"

Eret nodded, pleased by the reaction. He'd been mildly worried about surveilling Delphina by himself, and three heads were always better than one. "Let's get started," he said, nodding at the courtyard. "It's getting dark. She'll probably leave soon."

The three of them pressed closer together and gazed into the courtyard. Below, Delphina and her group were clearly packing up for the night. They exchanged awkward hugs, lavished one another with goodbyes fitting for a lifetime of separation, then slowly shuffled off in opposite directions. Delphina headed towards the Eastern Wing alone.

The Eastern Wing housed the Padawan Quarters. Delphina didn't have a padawan.

Eret glanced at Sapnap and Tubbo, both of whom nodded affirmation, then began slinking along the parapet.

Their progress was painful. Eret had to keep his footfalls silent, hide his mind, and make sure that they weren't spotted. Perhaps most draining was the act of shielding his mind. Due to Delphina's status as a traitor, Eret had employed Salem's emotional shedding technique to keep himself (and Sapnap and Tubbo) hidden.

When Dream and George had returned from the Underworld, Eret had spent a full day deciding if he wanted to view Kabo's holocom. Eventually, he'd caved.

Eret allowed a tired smile to touch his face. The emotional shielding technique that the former Jedi Master shared in Underworld dojos was slightly different from the practice he'd taught Eret years before. Kabo wasn't an idiot, after all. So, Eret could sense when others were shedding emotions, but no one would know if Eret was.

And Delphina most definitely was. Somehow, she'd gotten her hands on Salem's shielding technique.

That meant someone (most likely Aries) had supplied her with the knowledge. And the mob boss must have gotten it from someone who had spoken directly to Salem or taken one of the former Jedi Master's classes.

...just how convoluted was this scheme?

After a few minutes of silent tracking, Eret peered around a chimney and found that Delphina had disappeared. He frowned and reached his mind out for the other Jedi Master. He quickly discovered a trail of too-crisp emotions winding around the back of the Eastern Wing, and Eret picked up the pace, hurtling along the Temple rooftop.

The roof suddenly dropped off, and Eret skidded to a stop. He frantically threw out his arms, barely managing to stop Sapnap and Tubbo from tumbling over. Both Knight and padawan paled and shuffled backward. Once making sure that Sapnap and Tubbo were in no danger of falling, Eret scanned the courtyard beneath them.

Delphina stood in the shadows of a nearby building, fiddling with a loose tile. The metal panel suddenly thunked into place, and Delphina stepped away. Just as quickly as she'd arrived, the Jedi Master swept out of the courtyard, heading towards the Central Wing.

Eret held his breath. He kept his mind focused on Delphina's retreating presence and didn't release his mental probes until the other Jedi Master encountered Mazenos outside the infirmary.

"All clear," Eret whispered to his companions. "Time to see what she was doing, eh?"

"Let me go first," Tubbo whispered back. "I live here, so no one will be suspicious if I'm just standing around. I can say that I'm grabbing a book from my room or something."

Eret tipped his head, impressed. "Good idea."

Tubbo flushed pink, and the shy smile on his face made Eret's chest constrict with fondness. Gods, this padawan really didn't deserve all the shit he was going through. Then Tubbo dropped to the ground, landing with a slight thud. The brown-haired boy looked left, right, then left again. Finally, Tubbo twisted to shoot Eret and Sapnap a thumbs-up.

"Into the lion's den," Sapnap muttered. Before Eret could note that Sapnap had been a padawan not too long ago, the younger man slipped off the rooftop. Eret resolved to make the joke at a later date and followed his companions.

As soon as his feet touched the stones, the hairs on Eret's neck stood up, pricking at his nerves like thorns. *Something's not right*, Eret's sensitivity told him nervously. *It's dangerous here. Very, very dangerous.*

"Stay back," Eret barked.

Sapnap and Tubbo, both of whom had been advancing on the wall, stumbled to a stop. Eret hurried past them, grabbing the panel with the Force as he approached it. Once he was close enough, Eret planted his feet, inhaled deeply, and carefully pried the sheet from its nook.

As soon as the panel moved, a trigger activated.

Oh, *fuck*.

“Tubbo?” Eret murmured. The padawan instantly materialized at his side, eyes wide. “There's a dead man's trigger connected to this panel. I need you to deactivate it so I don't set off whatever traps were built into this gods-forsaken Temple.”

Tubbo's eyes doubled in size. But the brown-haired boy nodded and dropped to his knees, reaching into the tiny gap without an ounce of fear.

Gods, Eret longed to have some of Tubbo's confidence. Already, his hands were shaking, and he was suddenly struck by the revelation that he was no more invincible than Sapnap. Somewhere in the back of his mind, Eret had told himself that, had he been the one to confront Delphina, he would have made it out without a problem. But here he was, trapped by a fail-safe.

For a split second, Eret wondered what would happen if he died.

He was only 25. That was far too young to die, and gods, wouldn't it be unfair? Yes, Eret had sworn to sacrifice everything for the Temple and the Order. But he didn't want to sacrifice his own gods-damned life for people that hated him. Why did *he* have to die for a Council of insufferable idiots and an Order of spoiled rich kids?

What if all three of them died? Sapnap and Tubbo were even younger. Sapnap had just graduated to Knight, and Tubbo's future was as bright as a sun. The two of them had their entire lives to live, just like Eret.

Weren't the elders supposed to protect the next generation?

Salem had been exiled, leaving Eret with an unshakeable reputation. Sapnap's Master hated him, and the two of them hadn't spoken since Sapnap's graduation (Eret knew; he'd heard Master Dante bad-mouthing Sapnap during a Council meeting. Eret had politely told the old man to shut his fucking mouth). Tubbo at least had a caring Master, but Dream was just as neglected and lost as everyone else.

Why were Eret, Sapnap, and Tubbo the ones risking their fucking lives? What was the point in dying for an uncaring, unappreciative, and self-absorbed Order?

Tubbo made a triumphant noise, and Eret blinked, startled out of his head by the sudden sound.

“Got it!” Tubbo crowed. “You can remove the panel now!”

Eret exhaled sharply. He'd have to meditate quite a bit to dissect all those thoughts that had just flown around his head. But it wasn't the time or place for that. Eret steadied his grip on the panel and carefully removed the sheet of metal. Sapnap and Tubbo immediately raced past him, and Eret almost smiled at the enthusiasm.

“Eret?”

The dread in Sapnap's voice was unmistakable. Eret's cheer evaporated. “What is it?” he demanded, setting the panel of metal on the ground. As soon as Eret saw the newly exposed hole in the wall, he answered his own question. Bile rose in his throat, and Eret swallowed thickly, desperately trying to comprehend the rapidly evolving situation.

A bomb, cradled by a nest of wires, was nestled in the wall. A timer on the bomb displayed 04:55:59.

The seconds were ticking down.

## Chapter End Notes

Thank you so, so much for reading! If you're so inclined, please leave a comment letting me know what you thought! Y'all are the best readers I could ever hope for <3

Due to this chapter's late posting, the next one will go up on Saturday! For real this time, I promise-

Have a wonderful week, my friends, and I'll see you on Saturday!

(Not me having Sapnap and Tubbo grow to be close friends, because Jesus, the brotherly chemistry is just there for the writing.)



## Unbreakable, Part 4

### Chapter Notes

Hello, hello, my dear readers! I think I've officially lost the ability to post chapters on time lol, as it is currently very late where I am. (Technically, I'm posting this chapter on Sunday... but shhh, we're not going to talk about that)

I'm not gonna lie to you, this chapter completely ran away from me. It was supposed to be short-ish, and, uh... we're at 14k. Whoops? Regardless, y'all got a wild ride of a chapter in store today, and I hope you enjoy reading it as much I enjoyed writing it!

Trigger warning for mentions of death, semi-graphic injuries, and one allusion to child abuse. Always read at your own safety!

Now, on to the chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Wilbur peered into the ship's main room and looked around curiously. “George?” he called. No response. Wilbur frowned to himself, then stepped fully into the room and scanned it once again. “George?” Still no response. Worry began to pluck at Wilbur's heart, and he advanced on the ship's control panels with the growing fear that George had just *up and left, for whatever fucking reason*.

Then the captain's chair swiveled slightly, and the engineer came into view.

Wilbur exhaled deeply. “You scared me,” he grumbled with just a little bit of condemnation. He thought it was deserved, given that George had basically ignored me. “I was literally shouting for you. Didn't you hear me?”

“Hmm?”

Either George hadn't heard a word he'd said, or he was genuinely ignoring Wilbur.

“I'm talking to you, George,” Wilbur said, crossing the small living space. He sank into the co-pilot's chair and watched George's fingers fly over the ship's controls with experienced ease. Then Wilbur glanced at the engineer's face, and his worry came back in full force. George's face was blank. “You alright?” Wilbur asked hesitantly. “You've been quiet for a while now.”

“Have I?”

George still didn't look up from the controls. Tension strained the air between them, and Wilbur frowned, discreetly leaning forward to see the commands George was running. Some related to the ship's jets, others to the shields, and still more than controlled their rear thrusters. Wilbur didn't understand half of it, but he knew one thing for sure: none of it related to descent.

“George?” Wilbur muttered. “What's all this?”

The engineer finally looked up. He turned an even look on Wilbur, but it was laced with thinly-veiled suspicion. “Do you know what I'm doing?” George asked slowly.

Something dangerous flashed in the engineer's eyes, and Wilbur's heartbeat picked up. "Of course, I do," he said, praying that his nervousness didn't show. "I know how to fly a fucking ship. Why are we stopping?"

"We aren't stopping. We're-"

George cut himself off sharply, and the engineer turned back to the controls without another word.

Wilbur scowled. He hadn't gone this deep into the Underworld and dealt with so much shit just for an old friend to clam up on him now. Wilbur stood, then settled himself directly between George and the ship's controls. The engineer glared at him. Wilbur glared right back.

"Move, Wilbur," George gritted out. "Let me finish what I'm doing."

The muscles in George's neck were tense, and something in the air made Wilbur feel queasy. "No," he barked. "George, you're acting really fucking weird. Just tell me-"

A staff materialized out of nowhere and shot towards his face like a laser from a gun. Wilbur deflected the blow and shoved George with a Force blast, sending the engineer tumbling backward. George instantly launched back to his feet with an inhuman snarl. A hint of mania gleamed in the shorter man's eyes.

"Don't make me hurt you," George hissed, clenching his staff with white knuckles. "Listen, Wilbur-"

Wilbur didn't stop to listen. This encounter needed to be over as quickly as possible. So he simply stepped into George's space and grabbed the staff. George tried to wrench it free, but Wilbur let the Force do all the work for him. The shorter man continued to tug, and Wilbur watched him silently, trying to understand what the fuck was happening.

*He's acting like a cornered animal, Wilbur thought. He's not even utilizing anything that this staff can do. The fuck is going on?*

Their one-sided struggle went on several seconds, with Wilbur waiting for George to give up and the engineer refusing to relent. Finally, Wilbur reluctantly extended his mind. He was absolute shit at the mental aspects of being a Jedi. But if this scuffle continued, either Phil or Tommy would wake up, and Wilbur wouldn't let that happen.

Darkness crept at the edges of George's mind. The pool of Force power that usually sat placidly in the engineer's mind (proof of his incredible potential) had utterly disappeared, and in its place was dark smog. Which was... odd, to say the least.

"George?" Wilbur said carefully. The shorter man's arms dipped, and Wilbur tried again. "Let me help. What's going on?"

George's dark eyes widened slightly, and for just a second, fear flashed across his face.

*Help me.*

The thought vanished from Wilbur's mind as soon as it had appeared. George immediately began struggling again, but the shorter man's motions were stunted and weak. Suddenly, Wilbur understood.

George was keeping the darkness at bay. Most likely, he had completely cut himself off from the Force.

But... that meant the smog in George's mind was the Dark Side.

Wilbur inhaled to bellow for Phil. But George instantly lashed out, crashing the steel-tipped toe of his boot into Wilbur's shin. Pain shot up Wilbur's leg in terrible fractures, and Wilbur's shout turned into a croak. Through the tears that clouded his eyes, Wilbur watched resignedly as George reeled back for another kick.

"Sorry, George," Wilbur grunted.

The engineer launched another kick, and this time, Wilbur simply stepped aside. He drove an elbow into George's stomach, hooked the shorter man's planted leg with his, and shoved as hard as his body would allow. George toppled to the ground with a pained wheeze.

As soon as George was down, Wilbur's injured leg gave out. *Fucking hell*, George, Wilbur thought darkly, hurriedly settling himself into the captain's chair. *You'd better have a damn good explanation for this*. Blood soaked through Wilbur's pant leg (probably because of his *fucking fractured shin*), but he refused to get up. He wouldn't move until George woke up.

Five minutes later, George's eyelids fluttered open.

"About time," Wilbur snapped. He knew he was acting petty, but his fucking shin was shattered. He deserved to be a little acidic. "Care to explain what the fuck you were thinking?"

"Explain what I was thinking?" George repeated blearily. Wilbur said nothing, instead just watching as the engineer lifted himself to his elbows. Then George's cloudy gaze landed on Wilbur's leg, and panic began radiating from the shorter man like steam. "Oh, Holy fucking Kantos," George mumbled. "Did I- I didn't- oh, gods, Wilbur, I'm so sorry-"

"I know," Wilbur cut in sharply. "Explanation. *Now*."

George tucked himself into a cross-legged position, eyes never leaving Wilbur's bloody pant leg. For a long moment, the engineer was silent. Wilbur did nothing to alleviate the tension fizzling between them.

Finally, George lifted his gaze. "The Dark Side is really strong down here," the shorter man whispered. "I- I know you've probably felt it too, I just- I just didn't want to admit that it was affecting me. It... it's only been getting stronger since level 2000, and I... Will, it's out to get me, I swear. As soon as I start walking around, it started taunting me."

Wilbur hesitated. He hadn't felt anything.

But then again, he usually wouldn't be so caustic with someone who was clearly in pain. Maybe his perceptivity wasn't as sharp as it usually was.

"I thought I'd be fine," George continued in a ragged voice. Exhaustion painted the engineer's face a ghastly shade of white, and the last of Wilbur's annoyance dissolved. "I almost told Nick that he wasn't experienced enough to come down here."

Wilbur blinked a few times, trying to wrap his head around that simple sentence. "Come again?" he asked eventually.

"I didn't actually tell him that," George protested immediately. Though, judging by the guilt creasing his face, the shorter man that not saying anything wasn't any better. "But- I just thought- he's younger than me, right? And I've been down here for a while, so maybe I'd do better than he would. I'd be able to keep myself together and all that."

George shook his head several times and fell silent.

Wilbur scrutinized his friend. The darkness that had hunched in George's mind was gone, and the engineer's incredible Force presence had returned in full. But, clearly, George's mental shields weren't as strong as they'd once been. Not for the first time, Wilbur was struck by how different the two of them had become. Once upon a time, they'd been equals in lightsaber combat. Now... George was reduced to a mess whenever the Dark Side so much as touched his mind.

"You're not wrong," Wilbur murmured. George's gaze lifted, and Wilbur shot his old friend a warm smile. It came easy, despite the dark spots dancing in his eyes. "You're more experienced than Sapanap when it comes to the Underworld."

"Am I?"

Wilbur frowned. "Well, yeah. You lived down here for four years."

"But..." George slowly unfurled his arms and legs, and the engineer's eyes took on a new spark of life (though there was underlying frailty that made Wilbur's heart constrict). "I don't really know anything, do I?" George continued absently. "I mean, I didn't even know the Dark Side existed down here. How'd I miss that?"

Wilbur mulled over the thought for several seconds before he spoke again. "I mean, the Dark Side is everywhere, George, just like the Light Side. Since you've been working to open up to the Force again, it makes sense that you'd be experiencing influence from both sides."

"But I'm not that strong yet," George protested, waving a hand in Wilbur's general direction. Wilbur scowled at the dismissal, then immediately realized that he was being petty again and tried to drop his annoyance. "And if that's the case, why would I only feel it down here? Like, I woke up from my nap, and I was absolutely terrified of going further down. I've been to level 500 before. But I was literally so fucking scared that I tried to take us back up."

Sadness touched Wilbur's heart at that last sentence. "That's what you were trying to do?" he asked quietly.

The engineer flushed. "Yeah."

The two of them sat in silence for a moment. Wilbur's leg was steadily feeling worse and worse, but Wilbur couldn't be bothered to treat it yet. There was something important buried in this conversation; he was sure of it.

Then a memory from Wilbur's padawan days suddenly came to the forefront of his mind.

*"There's something below the Temple, isn't there?"*

*"What do you mean?"*

*"Like... there's a constant echo bouncing around the Temple. Can't you hear it, Master?"*

*"Don't be absurd. If there was something here, I would feel it. Is that all you bothered me for?"*

*"Well, no... I did some research. There used to be these things called vergences, and they embodied either the Dark Side or the Light Side. There was-"*

*"How did you get that?"*

*"I- I asked Master Salem. He was already in the library when I went, so I asked-"*

*"You idiot! Master Salem is a dangerous man! Give me- Wilbur, give me-"*

The memory disappeared as quickly as it had appeared. In a way, Wilbur was grateful for not having to relive the full experience. Conflicts with his Master had... never ended well for him. But the memory provided him with information that he'd completely forgotten about.

Ironic that Salem had been the one to tell him about vergences. Maybe the former Jedi Master's exile had been years in the making.

"I learned about something years ago," Wilbur began slowly, trying to put the pieces together in his mind. George instantly focused on him with a laser's intensity, and Wilbur almost smiled at the sudden attentiveness. "There were places where the Force gathered because of certain events. Like a death echo, but much, much stronger. They could be dedicated to either the Light Side or the Dark Side, and they could be taken over by either side. There were rumors that the Temple was built on one of those vergences, which is why it's so easy to train Jedi there. What if... what if there's a vergeance somewhere in the Underworld? Buried down there, to be fucking sure, but strong enough that we can feel it up here?"

George tapped his fingers rapidly against his knee. "That would make sense," the engineer mused. "That'd also explain why Philza and Techno can't feel each other. Like, even with whatever separating them, Philza *knew* that Techno was still on Coruscant. That's pretty impressive."

Wilbur hummed his agreement. Now that he was thinking about it, his theory about a vergeance in the Underworld made more and more sense. The toxic air of the lower levels, the danger inherent in descending the Underworld, the way that Wilbur hadn't even noticed the presence of the Dark Side until George had pointed it out. But...

"How are we going to find it?" Wilbur murmured. George shot him a confused look, and Wilbur sighed heavily. "Look, you said it yourself. Phil can't feel Techno, and their bond is stronger than most Masters and Padawans. For the Dark Side to separate them, Dream and Techno have to be near the convergence, if not inside it. So how do we find a Force landmark in an Underworld full of non-Force-sensitives?"

A spark of light lit up in the engineer's eyes, and slowly, George got to his feet. "There's a way," the shorter man said hesitantly. "But you won't like it."

Wilbur narrowed his eyes. "What are you thinking?"

"Hear me out, alright?"

"George-"

"No, listen - there are more Force-sensitives down here than you'd think. Even people who don't get any training feel something, and they're the ones who spread urban myths. I'd bet you anything that there are rumors about the lowest levels of the Underworld."

"Okay," Wilbur said slowly. "I don't see why I won't like this plan."

George hesitated for a long moment, shifting from foot to foot. Finally, the engineer admitted, "We have to stop the ship."

"No." Wilbur spoke before his brain even caught up, but he didn't change his answer once he'd thought it through. "That's the one thing we can't do," Wilbur continued sternly. "Dream and

Techno are down there going through gods know what, so we *cannot* stop. They need us.”

George's shoulders slumped, and Wilbur realized that that had come out a little harsher than he'd meant it. But before he could even apologize, the shorter man perked up again.

“I have another idea,” George murmured. “You won't like this one any more than the other one, but it won't make us stop. That makes it okay, right?”

Once again, before Wilbur could say anything, the engineer disappeared into the rest of the ship. Wilbur stared blankly at the empty hallway. He was starting to remember why George, Dream, and Sapnap had made such a lethal team. Dream came up with ideas, Sapnap got the ball rolling, and George carried it through.

And damn it all, Wilbur knew that he couldn't stop the engineer even if he tried.

A few minutes later, George reemerged from the hallway wearing 404's outfit.

“Take a mask,” Wilbur sighed, and he couldn't shake the feeling that he was a tired parent telling his kid to take care of themselves. “And try not to make too much of a scene.”

George glanced up from where he stood by the ship's hatch. “You don't even know what I'm going to do,” the shorter man said bemusedly.

Wilbur shrugged. “I have an idea. Care to tell me the specifics?”

“Yeah. I'm going to jump out of the ship, ask around nearby, then get back within half an hour. And before you start worrying, I know how to get around, okay? It takes 20 minutes for this ship to go down 100 levels. I can drop 100 levels in five minutes with my staff. If Philza wakes up... just tell him not to worry.”

“I don't think my word will really have any bearing on his worry,” Wilbur said archly. George cracked a small smile and opened the hatch, allowing the quiet whistle of wind to enter the cabin. Wilbur suddenly felt a surge of worry, and he called, “George? Be safe, alright? It took you four years to come back last time.”

George glanced over his shoulder, and Wilbur was struck by the change in the engineer's demeanor. Instead of being fearful and nervous, George was now confident and assured. The shorter man really was part of the Underworld.

“I'll be back soon,” George promised softly. “Don't worry.”

The engineer threw himself out of the ship, the hatch sliding shut behind him. Wilbur blinked dazedly. Now that George wasn't distracting him, Wilbur had suddenly become aware of the pain curling around his shin and the blood that was dripping down his ankle.

And, given the numb feeling in his fingertips, he might be going into shock. That was kind of a problem.

*Tommy*, Wilbur called into their bond. No response. *Tommy!*

*Ugh. The fuck do you want, Will? I'm trying to sleep.*

*I need a bacta patch.*

*What? Why?*

*Just hurry up and get me one. I'm sitting in the captain's chair.*

Confusion drifted through their bond, but a moment later, Tommy appeared in the hallway as if summoned by magic.

“Hey,” Wilbur said with a tired smile. “Don't worry about the blood. Just slap the bacta patch on, and the bones should mend.”

For just a moment, pure terror shot across their bond. Then it was gone, and Tommy raced across the room, already berating Wilbur for somehow getting hurt on a ship with a grand total of two sharp edges. But Wilbur's fuzzy mind was stuck on Tommy's brief sting of worry. For some reason, knowing the blond boy worried about him was... nice. Touching, almost.

“Will? Wilbur, are you listening to me?”

Wilbur hummed absently. The gentle chill of bacta pressed against his leg, and slowly, the knives of pain retracted from Wilbur's nerves. Thank the gods that bacta was fast-acting.

“Wilbur, I'm serious. Can you hear me?”

Oh, right, Wilbur had a padawan who was very worried about him. Wilbur shook his head a couple of times to remove the fuzzy feeling, then looked up at Tommy. The blond boy leaned on the armrests of his chair, brows furrowed.

“George broke my shin,” Wilbur mumbled. His mouth felt like it was filled with cotton (probably a side effect from the mix of blood loss and bacta).

“He did fucking *what*?”

Anger flared across their bond, and Wilbur hurriedly added, “S'not his fault. The Dark Side made him.”

Tommy scowled. “Wilbur, you're not making any fucking sense,” the blond boy muttered. “I'm going to let the bacta do its thing, and then I want you to tell me what's going on.”

Wilbur tried to speak, but a wave of nausea swept over him. He settled for nodding slightly.

It was an arduous couple of minutes. Wilbur was used to being asleep while receiving a bacta treatment (or, at least, laying down). Being fully aware and awake while having his bones knit together was an out-of-body experience. Wilbur alternated between feeling like he was floating on a cloud and being completely numb. Finally, *finally*, all the sensation faded. Wilbur was left with a clear mind and a leg that didn't make his life hell on earth.

Tommy had fallen asleep in the co-captain's chair. The blond boy's cheek was smushed into his palm, and his eyelids fluttered gently.

Wilbur smiled softly. He'd almost forgotten what Tommy had looked like before all of this. His padawan had been more peaceful, more... innocent. Well, Tommy had never been *innocent* – but more childlike, certainly. More full of hope and wonder and excitement for his future.

Their heart-to-heart in the training arena still weighed heavy on Wilbur's mind. On the one hand, it had been wonderful to finally talk to his padawan. But on the other... it had shown Wilbur just how close he was to losing Tommy. After all, the blond boy had said it himself: he and Tubbo could leave at any time if they so chose.

For just a moment, Wilbur had a horrible vision of waking up one morning and finding a note from Tommy pasted to his door.

His heart stuttered in his chest.

*Tommy isn't gone, Wilbur told himself firmly. It's just the Dark Side talking. Tommy is right here, and he just got me a bacta patch. It's fine. He's here.*

But Wilbur couldn't quite shake his fear. Was this what the Order had warned against all along? Wilbur would break every single rule in the book for Tommy, and his padawan would do the same for him. Didn't that go against everything it meant to be a Jedi, a being who was supposed to be unattached and unbiased? Did attachments make their job harder?

It didn't matter. Not yet, anyway. Wilbur had more pressing concerns than the doubt and anxiety gnawing away at his fragile self-confidence.

"Tommy?" Wilbur said gently. "Tommy, I'm up."

The blond boy snapped to attention. "Whaddyawant-" The padawan frowned, clearly drowsy from his impromptu nap. "Will?" Tommy mumbled. "Oh, right, right, you were – right. So, what happened to your fucking shin? Do I have to beat the shit out of George?"

Something about Tommy's sleepy protectiveness made Wilbur chuckle. "No, George is fine," he said reassuringly. "It wasn't his fault. The Dark Side got to him."

"The Dark Side?" Tommy repeated incredulously. "I don't buy that bullshit for a second."

"Tommy, reach out your mind. Tell me what you feel."

The blond boy frowned a little, and Wilbur felt his padawan's power spark. For a couple of moments, they both were silent. Then Tommy shot Wilbur a worried look.

"It's everywhere," Tommy murmured. "It's literally fucking everywhere. H-how is that possible?"

Wilbur smiled faintly. "Short version, there are these things called vergences that act as points of strong Force power. They can either belong to the Light Side or the Dark Side, and there's a Dark Side convergence buried somewhere in the Underworld. That's what's been causing all of our problems." An idea suddenly struck Wilbur, and he shot Tommy an appraising look. "Do me a favor. Lower your shields and stretch your mind out as far as it can go. Maybe you'll be able to feel something."

Tommy's expression twisted into something between apprehension and indignation. "Lowering my shields is dangerous, Will, you know that," the blond boy muttered. "I'll get overwhelmed."

Wilbur reached through their bond and sunk gentle fingers into the corners of Tommy's Force presence. "You won't," he promised. "You're stronger than the last time you tried. Please try. I'll be right here."

The uneasiness didn't leave Tommy's face, but the blond boy nodded slightly. A second later, Tommy's Force presence exploded. Standing before his padawan's unrestrained power was dizzying, to say the least. But Wilbur let the Force flow through his body like he was nothing more than a conductor. He was there to steady Tommy, not control him.

Like a stone dropping through a pond, they sank into the Underworld. Wilbur watched, awestruck, as millions of Force presence hurtled past them. But something pulled them past all the living



beings, towards the very core of Coruscant. They reached level 1000. Level 500.

Tommy suddenly recoiled, and they came to a screeching halt at level 350.

*What is it?* Wilbur asked, worried.

*There's... there's something down there. I'm not going any closer.*

The fear radiating off of Tommy was evident, and Wilbur decided it was best not to push. *That's alright. What do you feel from right here?*

*Anger. Hatred. Everything from here down is just a massive chasm of terrible things. Can you feel it, too?*

Opening up was dangerous. But, at Tommy's prompting, Wilbur dropped his shields a fraction. Instantly, he was bowled over by every bad thing he'd ever thought or felt. Power surged at his fingertips, goading him to drive a killing blow into the necks of each Council member. Wilbur could be so much more than a useless historian if he only allowed himself to be free. What was the Jedi Code but a series of useless rules? He knew how fucked the Order was. What was the point in-

Wilbur hurriedly raised his shields, and he dragged Tommy out of the abyss as fast as humanely possible. When Wilbur opened his eyes, he felt sick to his stomach, and Tommy's face was pale.

"That's definitely the Dark Side," Wilbur rasped. "That was... Holy fucking Kantos. How can Phil feel Techno through all of *that*?"

Tommy shook his head wordlessly. They sat silently for a couple of seconds, both breathing heavily as they tried to recover. *No wonder George caved*, Wilbur thought with no small amount of respect. *He lost all his training, and he still managed to resist its temptations. That's... that's fucking impressive.*

"Will?"

Wilbur looked up. Tommy was giving him a look that almost classified as shy, and Wilbur frowned. "What?" he asked.

Tommy opened and closed his mouth several times before any words came out. "Do you think you're worthless?"

That one simple sentence hit Wilbur like a wrecking ball. More cracks spread across his self-conviction, and Wilbur suddenly felt like a glasshouse about to shatter. But he stuffed all his feelings down and said, "No. Why?"

Tommy's eyes dropped to the floor, and Wilbur suddenly felt terrible for lying. "I mean, I know you're pretty confident," his padawan mumbled. Wilbur barely kept from scoffing. "But... if you did think you were worthless, I'd say that you aren't. You're the most persistent bastard I know. And... I mean, you've helped me a little bit. Y'know. So, you aren't worthless. I don't- I don't know what I'd do without you."

In a perfect world, Wilbur would have smiled and responded to Tommy's timid affection with some beautifully crafted speech about how he was glad Tommy cared for him. But Wilbur didn't live in a perfect world. Instead of making a touching speech, the power of speech completely abandoned him. Tommy flushed a little, and the blond boy quickly stood, hurrying away with a muttered apology about exhaustion and emotions. Wilbur could only watch, dumbstruck.

Did he really mean that much to Tommy?

Slowly, Wilbur heaved himself out of his chair. Tommy had laid down on one of the benches and curled into the fetal position, facing the wall. He'd completely closed himself off from their bond.

"Tommy?" Wilbur murmured once he'd settled himself next to his padawan. Tommy curled even tighter, and Wilbur heaved a silent sigh, putting a gentle hand on the blond boy's shoulder. "Thank you. That means a lot."

It wasn't a moving speech. It wasn't even very eloquent. But painstakingly slowly, Tommy's shields dropped. Wilbur smiled at Tommy's evident embarrassment, and with his free hand, he began absently threading his fingers through Tommy's hair. His padawan rarely brushed his hair, so Wilbur took it upon himself to untangle any knots he found.

The minutes blended together. Wilbur was content to stare at the opposite wall and let his mind drift through the past, revising all the memories he classified as precious. Most of them involved Tommy, Techno, Phil, and Tubbo. Gods, how Wilbur wanted all five of them to be together again.

A Force presence suddenly approached the room, and Wilbur blinked himself out of his head.

Phil emerged from the hallway a moment later. "Oh, Will," the older man said, as if he hadn't been traveling with Wilbur for more than half a day already. "You alright? I felt something from you and Tommy."

"What?" Wilbur asked, confused. Then he remembered his and Tommy's jaunt into the Dark Side, and he shuddered. "Oh. Right. We're fine, don't worry. We just figured out what's at the center of Coruscant. Or, at least, at the bottom of this chute."

Phil's face darkened. "A Dark Side vengeance, huh?" the Jedi Master muttered. Wilbur couldn't hide his shock, but Phil waved a dismissive hand. "I had my theories. I didn't want to say anything until I had some solid proof. Where's George?"

Wilbur grimaced and jerked his chin at the hatch. "Out. Getting a feel for the local rumors."

"Ah." Phil crossed the room and spun one of the chairs around to face Wilbur. A fond smile touched the Jedi Master's face. "I have a communicator in my pocket," Phil said softly. "Got it from Cho-Nal before we left. He wanted Tubbo to talk to us. I was going to suggest that we call right now, but..." Phil's smile turned into an amused grin. "Tommy seems a little out of it."

Wilbur glanced, and he was surprised to find that Tommy had fallen asleep. The blond boy had scooted up to rest his head on Wilbur's leg, and Wilbur still carded his fingers through Tommy's hair. He hadn't thought to stop.

"He's tired," Wilbur explained, and he almost cringed at the fondness dripping from his voice. "He'll probably take another nap before we get down to the core."

"Probably."

They lapsed into silence. Then Phil's words registered, and Wilbur raised an eyebrow at the older man. "Cho-Nal?" he repeated warily.

"Mhm." Phil leaned back and put his arms behind his head, staring at a point on the ceiling. "Apparently, he had a change of heart after seeing George volunteer himself for this mission. First time for everything, I guess."

The sudden motion drew Wilbur's eyes to Phil's left arm, and he grinned faintly. "Looks good," he noted. "I didn't even notice that it was your prosthetic."

Phil grinned back at him, holding his arms out in front of him. They looked like two regular tanned arms. "It does look good, doesn't it? George did an incredible job. I woke up and forgot that I'd lost my arm until it started aching."

Wilbur chuckled, but thoughts of George brought Wilbur's attention back to Cho-Nal. "Be careful with that communicator," he said quietly. "I wouldn't be too quick to trust him."

"Oh, I don't at all. I tested the communicator before we left the Temple. It's safe."

At the mention of the Temple, Wilbur's mind drifted back to the place that he'd called home since childhood. Though he was only a couple of hours away from it, Wilbur almost homesick. But that wasn't the right word. Wilbur wanted to go back. Back before all the attacks and pain...

Back before Tommy had known civil war.

Wilbur didn't feel like talking anymore. Luckily, Phil didn't seem inclined to speak either, and they sat in silence for several minutes.

Eventually, the quiet was broken by the crackling of the ship's intercom.

*Will, I know where Clay and Techno are. I'm on my way back.*

---

"Move!" Nick bellowed. His gaze landed on a group of padawans clustered inside the building, and he growled, marching towards the twittering teenagers. "Did you not hear me?" Nick snarled once he was close enough. "You need to get out of here!"

"I'm not leaving," one of the padawans scoffed. He was a lanky Twi'lek who looked no older than 14, even with the defiant smile that twisted his features. "You gonna make me?"

Nick's patience snapped like a twig, and he lunged forward, grabbing the padawan's tunic and dragging the boy away. The Twi'lek kicked and twisted, but Nick only tightened his grip.

"Let me go!" the Twi'lek squawked. "Guys, help me-!"

Nick drove his free elbow into the padawan's stomach, and the boy's words dissolved into ragged gasps. "Shut up," Nick hissed. "*Everyone* is in danger right now. You don't get to make yourself a special case."

They reached the courtyard, and Nick tossed the padawan forward. The Twi'lek collapsed with a dramatic gasp, earning Nick the attention of all the nearby padawans and Jedi. Nick responded to the curious glances with a cold glare. His observes quickly turned away.

Problem solved, Nick launched himself onto a nearby rooftop and turned. The courtyard was clogged with people. Most were sleepy padawans, complaining of being dragged from their beds at 11 o'clock at night. Others were Masters, keeping their padawans from getting into trouble. Still more were regular Jedi acting as crowd control. For as chaotic as the situation was, no one had gotten hurt, and no one was panicking.

Yet.

Nick inhaled shakily. His emotions had been all the place for hours now, but he couldn't take a break. There were still padawans and Jedi that hadn't been evacuated. Nick shook his head to clear the exhaustion bubbled at the back of his mind, stretched his arms over his head, then launched himself back into the fray.

The courtyard was quickly descending into chaos. The sheer amount of emotions in the air was dizzying, and Nick kept his head down as he wove through his fellows. Just as he was about to break from the ranks, someone snagged his elbow.

“Master... are we going to be okay?”

Nick glanced down. A padawan was clinging to the sleeve of his robes. The girl, who almost looked too young to be a padawan, stared at Nick with wide, teary eyes.

He couldn't just walk away.

Nick dropped a knee and carefully detached the girl's hand from his robes, though he didn't push her away. “Of course, we're going to be okay,” Nick said quietly. He didn't bother correcting her about his rank. “Where's your Master?”

The girl rubbed his eyes with the back of her hand. “I don't know,” she sniffed, and she was clearly on the verge of tears. “They... they were here, then they left. I- I don't know-”

“Hey, hey, don't worry,” Nick interrupted gently. He squeezed the girl's hand, and slowly, she stopped trembling. “We'll find them. What's their name?”

“Pyre!”

Nick looked up at the shout. Rhodys was hurrying towards him, arms outstretched.

The girl had also turned at the call, and her face lit up at Rhodys' sudden appearance. “Master!” the girl shrieked. Nick let go of the girl (Pyre), and she took off, launching herself at Rhodys. The Trandoshan caught her in a bear hug, and for a moment, Master and Padawan clung to each other. The sight made Nick smile.

Eventually, Rhodys broke the hug and turned to face Nick. “Thank you,” they murmured. “I thought I'd lost her somewhere.”

Embarrassment suddenly shoved its way into Nick's mind. “You're welcome,” he said, trying not to let his blush show. “I didn't know you had a padawan, Rhodys.”

Rhodys' grin was brighter than the moons. “Just took her on a few days ago. No time like the present.

Something about the Trandoshan's optimism gave Nick newfound strength, and he drew himself up to his full height. “She seems like a good kid,” Nick said warmly, and Rhodys chuckled, gently pulling Pyre back to their side. “Stay safe, Rhodys. I'll see you when all this hell is over.”

Before the Jedi Master could respond, Nick turned and raced back into the Eastern Wing. If he stayed in one place for too long, he'd collapse. As he flew down the darkened hallways, reaching his mind out for anyone that he'd missed, Nick heard a faint noise drifting through the air.

*Tick... tick... tick... tick...*

Logically, Nick knew that the bomb made no sound, and he certainly wouldn't be able to hear it

from so far away. But the constant noise wore on his nerves. It drove Nick's heartbeat up, and his lungs gasped for air that didn't seem forthcoming.

After a few minutes, Nick found a nervous Chiss padawan hiding in their room. They followed Nick without question (which Nick silently thanked the gods for). On the way back out, they picked up one of the Chiss' friends, a muscular boy, and the boy's brother. With his gaggle of padawans close behind, Nick burst out of the Eastern Wing. He only waited for the three padawans to find their respective Masters before he turned and dove back in.

Why Nick was so intent on finding everyone, he didn't know. Other Jedi were scouring the Eastern wing as well. But there was an urge in Nick's bones that forced him to keep moving, refusing to let him stop until everyone was safe. Maybe his exhaustion had torn through his self-control. Or maybe it was some self-destructive need to save everyone. Whatever it was, it had set Nick on an unrelenting warpath.

Half an hour passed in a similar fashion. Nick ventured deeper and deeper into the Eastern Wing, sometimes calming hysteria and assuaging fears before leading padawans and Jedi to the front courtyard. Nick and Eret had decided beforehand that the front courtyard was a safe place to dump everyone. But, as Nick watched the courtyard begin to overflow, he was starting to have his doubts.

What if the Eastern Wing blew up? People would be crushed, either by each other or the falling debris.

No time to think. Keep moving.

Nick turned and prepared to reenter the Eastern Wing. Then a familiar mop of brown hair came rushing towards him, trailed by a pack of younger padawans, and Nick froze in his tracks. Once the mop of hair reached him, Nick caught the padawan by the shoulders.

"Tubbo, what are you doing?" Nick demanded, a little more frantically than he intended.

"Getting everyone out!" the brown-haired boy responded, just as nervously. "We only have half an hour left, right? When are the police going to get here?"

At the mention of the bomb, Nick swallowed thickly. When he, Eret, and Tubbo had first found the bomb, they'd quickly realized that one second on the timer did not equate to one second of their time. Instead, it was closer to two seconds. They'd had 2 and a half hours, not five.

Nick suddenly realized that he'd been quiet too long, and he blurted. "Uh, I dunno. Soon. That's all they told me."

Tubbo made a frustrated noise that Nick related a little too much to and turned, clearly planning to head back into the Eastern Wing. Nick held him fast, and the padawan shot him an annoyed look.

"Let me go, Sapnap," Tubbo snapped. "I have to—"

"No."

The single word tumbled from Nick's lips before he could stop it. Tubbo's glare morphed into a confused stare, and Nick set his jaw, trying to assemble his jumbled thoughts into cohesive sentences. Finally, he said,

"I am not letting you go back in there. Look, Tubbo, I know I'm not your Master. But Clay isn't here, and I'm not going to let you fucking die while he's gone. You're too fucking important. So I

need you to get everyone out of this courtyard. There are too many people here, and if one person panics, everyone else is going to. Get the younger padawans and their Masters out first, okay?"

For a long, long moment, Tubbo just gaped at him. Then, slowly, the brown-haired boy nodded.

"Okay. Okay, I will."

Nick nodded in return and released Tubbo from his death grip. The padawan instantly raced into the crowd, and Nick heaved a sigh of relief. He'd been worried that he would have to fight with Tubbo over that. At least the kid had a decent head on his shoulders.

A message suddenly lit up Nick's wrist communicator. He glanced down at the tiny screen, scanning the brief statement from Coruscant's Chief of Police.

*We'll be there in ten minutes.*

Nick ground his teeth. He and Eret had sent a distress message almost two hours ago, and only now did the police come to help them. Gods, Nick and Eret really had to do everything themselves, didn't they?

With a mental timer ticking in the back of his head, Nick tore back into the Eastern Wing.

What if the bomb's timer had sped up while he'd been away? Eret had been keeping watch, but what if Delphina had somehow managed to kill him? What if Eret was a traitor, too, and he was going to set the bomb off early? What if-

A rapid series of pings interrupted Nick's dark, downhill spiral. He skidded to a stop and glanced at his wrist communicator. Nine new messages awaited him, all from Eret.

*Time still doubled. Two hours left.*

*Delphina still nowhere to be seen. Hour and a half left.*

*The timer sped up. I think we have about an hour left.*

*Delphina is two buildings over, watching the rest of the Temple. Hasn't spotted me yet. She doesn't look armed.*

*Time sped up again. We only have 45 minutes now. Delphina moved, and I lost visual. Need backup.*

*Delphina left the rooftop. Would really appreciate backup.*

*Sapnap, I don't know where she is. I need you back here.*

*Fuck, I don't think these messages are going through. I don't know if she has help, so I'm going to move.*

*I'm in the back hallway of the Eastern Wing. I can't see the bomb anymore, so I really need you to hurry up and get back here.*

Panic speared Nick's heart. Eret's message about time speeding up for the second time had been sent almost half an hour ago.

Oh, fuck, they only had fifteen minutes left.

Nick sprinted through the hallways. His breaths came as rattling gasps, and his legs burned as he pushed them to the max. Eret's last message had been sent two minutes. With any luck, Nick could get there before Delphina made a move.

*And what if you aren't lucky?* a sinister little voice in the back of Nick's head asked. *What if you're too late?*

Nick ignored the voice, ignored the nausea threatening to drive him to his knees, ignored the fear that pin-balled around his head. The first step was getting to Eret. Everything else came after that.

After a brief eternity, Nick flew around a corner and found Eret waiting for him, anxiously shifted from foot to foot.

"Oh, thank the gods," Eret sighed as Nick ran up to him. "I think Delphina set up a signal blocker on the other building. Did my messages go through?"

"Only once I got close," Nick panted. He flew past Eret and kept running, and thankfully, Eret dropped into place next to him. "Is Delphina still gone?"

"I don't know. I had to move for my messages to go through."

*Gods-damn it.* "Okay. Fingers crossed she's not waiting for us."

Nick and Eret didn't speak as they ran. In Eret's case, he probably had nothing to say, and Nick simply didn't have the breath to speak. There were so many questions and fears bouncing around Nick's head, but he kept them all bottled up. Eret didn't have answers. Answers wouldn't help him. All that mattered was action and the ever-looming threat of death.

Nick swallowed thickly and tried to ignore how sick he felt.

Finally, the two of them reached the back courtyard of the Eastern Wing. Nick slowed to a walk and quickly steadied his breathing before peering around the archway.

Delphina was nowhere to be seen.

"Clear," Nick whispered.

Eret inclined his head, so Nick slipped around the archway and darted across the courtyard, settling himself into the shadows. Across the way, Eret took up a position behind a pillar. Nick took a shuddering breath. He wasn't going to die. Not tonight. Delphina was going to show up, and he and Eret would fight her off without a problem. Everything would be-

A Force presence suddenly appeared at the edge of the courtyard.

Nick could have sworn that his heartbeat was loud enough for other people to hear. He desperately held his breath and leaned beyond his pillar.

Delphina stood bathed in moonlight. She swept across the courtyard with silent footfalls, face passive. Something about the mere sight of the Jedi Master made Nick's blood boil. She was about to set off a deadly bomb, and she was okay with it? She was just chill? No. No fucking way.

In retrospect, Nick would realize that getting angry right then had been a terrible idea. But at the moment, Nick thought nothing of his rage – until Delphina reached out towards him, and Nick was suddenly hauled off the ground by an invisible hand and dragged into the light.

"You should have known better, little Knight," Delphina murmured. She didn't sound apologetic, exactly. But her voice was definitely laced with pity. "Anger isn't the Jedi way. Yet you and your friends carry so much of it. I empathize, believe it or not."

"Fuck you," Nick spat. "If you empathized, you wouldn't be trying to kill-" Delphina's grasp tightened, and Nick gagged as his vision almost went black.

"This isn't my fault. If you had just left well enough alone, we wouldn't be in this position. I want to tell you that I'm sorry, Sapnap. Your friends led you down this path. I wish you would have respected the Council like everyone else and just played by the rules."

All of Nick's friends flashed through his head in a kaleidoscope of colors. Clay, who had been forced to fit a perfect mold. George, exiled for his mistakes, and Bad, scorned for being a daemon. Skeppy, ignored, and Ant, shoved aside. If every single one of Nick's friends had been treated so poorly, then it couldn't be their fault. Surely they weren't the broken ones. After all, they'd all been the same when they'd entered the Order: just impressionable younglings.

The hand around Nick's throat was so tight, he almost couldn't feel it. He still struggled to breathe, but oxygen deprivation didn't hurt as much as he knew it should. What was happening?

...was he dying?

Delphina suddenly screamed, and Nick's sight returned in vivid color. He was dropped to the ground, and he crumpled on impact, pressing his forehead into the ground as he gasped for air. Gods, Nick's ears were ringing so loudly. He couldn't... he couldn't see straight. Everything was still so dark. Surely Eret could take care of Delphina by himself.

*No! Get up!*

The little voice at the back of Nick's mind gave him pause.

*You're a Jedi, aren't you? You're meant to protect everyone, and if you can't even support one of your friends, then you'll never grow! Get the fuck up!*

Fresh resolve surged through Nick's body. He grit his teeth then pressed himself onto all fours and scrambled backward. For a few seconds, Nick was still too bleary-eyed to understand the situation.

Then Nick's ears popped, and his vision cleared.

Delphina stood in the center of the courtyard, clutching her right shoulder. Eret blocked the entrance to the Eastern wing with his silver lightsaber raised. The Jedi Master's face was set with grim determination.

"-not the Jedi way!" Delphina was shouting, pretty face twisted in pain. "What would Salem think of you dislocating your opponent's shoulder?!"

Eret's eyes flicked to Nick, and the Jedi Master raised a thin eyebrow. *You okay?*

Nick nodded slowly. He carefully slid his lightsaber from his belt.

"I don't know if you can talk about being a model Jedi, Delphina," Eret said breezily, returning his gaze to the slim woman. "After all... you're the one trying to kill the next generation. Not the best look."

"That's not what I'm trying to do!" Delphina snapped.



Nick rose to his feet, keeping his eyes fixed on Delphina's turned back. How was he supposed to stop her without killing her? There was an ugly, dark part of himself that wanted to cut off Delphina's arm or blind just (just so she'd know Philza's and Eret's pain), but revenge wouldn't resolve this conflict. Could he knock her out? Maybe-

“What about you, Eret? What good have you done for the Order?”

Nick suddenly realized that he'd spaced out, and he mentally slapped himself. This was no time to get distracted by semantics.

“You slink around behind the curtain and pretend that you're doing *so much*,” Delphina continued, basically spitting the words at Eret. “You're no better than the rest of them! You're determined to see things through your way, and you refuse to compromise! Gods, people like you are the reason that the Council fell apart in the first place!”

For just a moment, the tip of Eret's lightsaber dipped.

Nick felt the tug of the Force before Delphina even moved. He spun around in time to see a giant chunk of rock sailing through the air. Nick's body moved without his conscious thought, activating his lightsaber and slicing the rock in half. Both halves toppled to the ground, and Delphina whirled around with a wild stare.

Nick suddenly realized that he had to move.

Only Nick's frantic dive to the right saved him from being crushed by one of the rock halves. He desperately grabbed at the other half, but Delphina wrenched it from his grasp, reeling back for a second hit. Nick planted his feet and raised his lightsaber. This time, when he sliced the rock in two, he held both new halves with the Force.

“Sapnap!”

Eret's shout trailed behind him as he threw himself towards Delphina. The slim woman turned, raising her lightsaber in preparation to defend herself.

Nick hurled his missiles at Delphina's turned back.

One rock sailed harmlessly over Delphina's head. The other crashed into Delphina's injured shoulder, and the Jedi Master let out a howl of power. Eret charged forward and drove his shoulder into Delphina's chest, and she stumbled back. Nick raced into the fray. With Delphina off balance, he could sweep the woman's feet out from under her and put her on her back.

But instead of being met with Delphina's panicked face, Nick found himself facing a blue lightsaber.

Nick twisted violently to catch the sudden strike, and he only had time to think, *Oh, fuck*, before all his brainpower was dedicated to staying alive. Left, right, left again, then a sweeping overhead. Nick parried them all, but the power that Delphina put behind each blow made his arms shake. What was Delphina's fighting form? Niman? Of course, she would use the only lightsaber form that had no apparent weakness.

Then again, there was a reason that Delphina had become a Jedi Master, wasn't there?

Delphina suddenly disappeared from view, and Nick threw himself forward. It was the only thing that saved him. Delphina's lightsaber carved off a chunk of his hair and singed his neck, but Nick remained in one piece. He stood from his roll and whirled, already bracing for Delphina's

next blow. It came instantly. Nick's wrists screamed in agony.

"You can't beat me," Delphina hissed, swinging her lightsaber again and again. Nick's body was moving on sheer instinct. "I don't want to kill you, Sapnap. Just let me-"

Nick slammed his heel into Delphina's knee. It was petty, yes, but it broke the Jedi Master's rhythm for just a moment. *Yes!* Nick thought desperately. He drove his lightsaber forward and begged the gods that his strike connected.

The gods weren't on his side.

Delphina somehow dodged his blow entirely. The Jedi Master grunted, then snarled, and her next swing was too fast for Nick to even see. He only had time to raise his lightsaber before his vision was filled with blinding blue light.

Fire seared across Nick's face.

If Nick screamed, he couldn't hear himself. Gods, he couldn't- he couldn't think, everything *hurt so much*. It felt like molten lava had filled Nick's right eye socket, and his other eye was flooded with tears of pain. Nick gasped, desperately trying to comprehend what had just happened.

Was he- what about Delphina? Did she- No. But his-

Nick's head spun wildly, and he dropped to his knees, clasping a hand over his right eye. Gods, he couldn't *see anything*. But Delphina... Delphina was still on her feet. What if she-

The sound of lightsabers clashing filled the air.

Calling on all the strength he still possessed, Nick lifted his head.

Eret and Delphina faced each other in the middle of the courtyard. Silver and blue flashed through the air, each blow sending sparks flying everywhere. The two Jedi Masters were little more than blurry outlines to Nick's one good eye, but he could still see that both were using all their power. He felt Delphina's flow of Force power and the way that Eret fed off of Delphina's frustration.

*C'mon, Eret*, Nick thought blearily. *Don't... don't let her win. She... she's trying to hurt everyone. She's already hurt everyone.*

Eret suddenly let out a grunt of pain, and even through a haze of pain, Nick recognized that sound as a bad one. Sharp panic pierced the fog, and Nick blinked, trying to remember his training. He wasn't helpless. Hell, even if he was down an eye, he still had power! Eret needed his help!

The two Jedi were locked together, both clearly trying to force the other to their knees. Nick took a shaky breath, then reached out for Delphina's Force presence. It writhed around the slim woman like a snake, feeding off of every emotion that Delphina offered it. It wasn't the Dark Side, exactly... but she was no longer a Jed. Maybe she never had been.

Nick clamped a hand over Delphina's Force presence.

It felt like he was holding the sun in his hands. Delphina tried to toss him away, but Nick set his jaw and ignored the inferno that raged against his skin. Delphina shouted something. Nick ignored that, too.

A dull thud filled the air, and suddenly, Delphina's Force presence dimmed. As soon as she went down, Nick released his hold and clutched his hands to his chest. Gods, it felt like his skin had

been seared away. Everything... everything hurt so much.

“Sapnap! *Nick!*”

*That's my name*, Nick thought, bewildered. His vision was quickly fading into darkness, but the shock of hearing his real name was enough to keep him awake for a few more seconds. *Only George and Clay know my name. H-how-*

Gentle hands gripped Nick's legs and shoulders, and Nick slowly realized that he was staring up at the night sky. Had he been picked up?

“Nick, stay with me.”

This time, Nick recognized the voice. “Eret?” he slurred. “Did you win?”

“I won. She's down.”

Eret rotated, and Nick blinked a few times, trying to figure out what he was looking at. Finally, his brain registered the blurry form of Delphina crumpled on the ground. The woman's chest slowly rose and fell, and the sight made Nick smile. Good. Delphina wasn't dead. She shouldn't die.

“I'm so sorry, Nick. I should have protected you. Delphina trapped me against the wall, and I just... I'm sorry. I'm so sorry.”

Guilt and misery laced Eret's voice. Nick didn't like that. “It's not your fault,” Nick mumbled.

“You're... you're less than half her age, right? You... you don't know everything she knows. You're not perfect. Tha's okay.”

Speaking became too much of an effort, and Nick let himself slump against Eret's chest. By now, he'd figured out that Eret was carrying him bridal style. Nick wanted to complain, but... he didn't have the energy for that anymore.

“Master Jedi! Where's the bomb?”

*Bomb?* Nick wondered. *Oh, yeah. There's a bomb in the Temple. That must be Coruscant Police. At least they finally showed up.*

“It's over there, behind that wall. You have about five minutes. And I need someone to cuff this woman. She's a traitor to the Order, and she just attempted to kill both of us.”

“Yes, sir. We'll take care of it.”

More words were thrown around, but Nick's weary mind couldn't process all of them. He closed his eyes and let the gentle rhythm of Eret's steps soothe all the pain that crowded his head.

Suddenly, a voice pulled Eret from the darkness.

“Sapnap? Sapnap! Oh, fuck- Eret, what happened? Is he alive? Oh, gods, no-”

“It's okay, Tubbo. He's alive.”

“Gods, are you sure? He doesn't-”

“He's alive. Get a medic.”

“Right, okay, he needs- yeah, okay, I'm on it!”

It took Nick several minutes to sort through those few sentences. Eventually, he pieced the short interaction together, and a dopey smile spread across his face.

Tubbo was still alive. The Eastern Wing hadn't blown up.

They'd won.

---

The mask made him feel claustrophobic.

Tommy wasn't used to having problems with tight spaces. During one mission abroad, he and Wilbur had been forced to crawl through ventilation pipes to escape a fire. That hadn't given Tommy any problems.

Yet, wandering through the cracked boulders and curling vines, Tommy just couldn't calm his racing heart. Each breath he took didn't seem to provide air to his lungs. The feeling was horrible, and Tommy made a silent vow to never make fun of Wilbur for being claustrophobic again. He felt stifled and antsy and-

"Hey, Tommy. Breathe."

A hand landed on Tommy's shoulder, and he flinched at the contact. But George didn't pull away. Instead, the engineer fixed him with a knowing look.

"One deep breath," George ordered. "Just one. Breathe in and hold it."

Tommy reluctantly did as the shorter man told him. However, despite his misgivings, the single breathe worked. Some of Tommy's anxiety ebbed, and suddenly, he could breathe normally again.

"Again."

In and out. More nerves disappeared.

"Feel any better?"

"Yeah," Tommy admitted. "Thanks."

George nodded once, then turned and headed back towards the rock he'd been investigating. The engineer had been quiet ever since his jaunt into the Underworld (somewhere around level 1500), and honestly, Tommy was in no mood to break the silence. He couldn't shake his grudge. Wilbur would walk with a limp for days.

Then again... Tommy couldn't blame George too much. Down here, in the thick of things... it was terrifying. All-encompassing darkness tugged at the edges of Tommy's shields, silently echoing questions that he asked himself every day.

Tommy shuddered and shook off his doubts. They were *so* close to finding Dream and Techno.

"What are we looking for, again?" Tommy shouted to George. "Because I've been staring at this abandoned street for almost fifteen fucking minutes, and I don't think it's going to magically change."

George was quiet for a moment. Then the engineer sighed heavily and shot Tommy a weary glance. "You're right," George called back. "I don't feel anything. I don't think this is the vergeance."

Tommy blinked. He'd grown to expect some level of acidity from the shorter man (or at least a playful jab at Tommy's ego). But George just turned and started back down the cracked path. Tommy scrambled to his feet and hurried after the silent engineer, trying not to let his gaze wander too much.

The four of them had descended all the way to level 2. Tommy still hated thinking about how deep he was. His entire life, everyone had told him that level 1 of the Underworld was unsuitable to sentient life, and every level up from there (until around the 2000s) was toxic. Yet here Tommy was, wandering around level 2 like he was a gods-damned tourist.

It wasn't for naught, though. George had returned from level 1500 citing local rumors about a dark place at Coruscant's very center, where only the foolish dared go. The few who returned alive were different... darker.

It hadn't taken long after that for Tommy's sensitivity to go haywire. Somewhere on level 2, there was a vengeance.

*Tommy... why weren't you here?*

Tommy flinched at the whisper. He kept his gaze focused on George's back, but frozen fingers still plucked at his sleeves.

*It hurts. Why did you let me die, Tommy? I thought you said you'd protect me...*

"You aren't dead, Tubbo," Tommy gritted out. "Leave me alone."

The voice didn't respond. Tommy decided against looking over his shoulder, instead picking up the pace and falling into step at George's side. The engineer glanced up at him but said nothing. Tommy appreciated that.

If it hadn't been so decrepit, Tommy would have found level 2 beautiful. The calling stretched high above them, almost too tall to see, and the ruins of temples and buildings were strewn across weathered streets. Tommy liked to think that level 2 had once been a lively trade hub. Maybe an entirely different race of people had lived here.

Not anymore, though. Now, level 2 was nothing more than a barren wasteland of memories, filled with some sort of thick, green haze. Tommy didn't quite understand what exactly about the lower levels was toxic (given that his mask covered his nose and mouth and nothing else), but he didn't want to ask questions. Level 2 commanded silence.

*Tommy! Help me!*

Tommy whipped around on sheer instinct, scanning the landscape for his Master with his heart hammering his chest. He knew every nuance of Wilbur's voice, and he wouldn't let-

Right. The Dark Side was making him hear things.

"George?" Tommy called, and he hated how his voice shook. A couple of paces ahead of him, the engineer paused. "Can you feel anything down here?"

George's shoulder visibly tensed, and he started walking again. "No. Why?"

Tommy scowled. He power-walked until he caught up with the engineer, then glared down at the shorter man, who steadfastly ignored his stare. "That's fucking bullshit, and we both know it," Tommy snapped. "You felt something, or you wouldn't have broken Wilbur's fucking shin."

George's eyes widened, and he finally met Tommy's stare. "I broke his shin?" the shorter man repeated, clearly horrified. "I thought I- oh my fucking gods. He didn't tell me that."

"He's good at hiding stuff like that," Tommy muttered. He wanted to stay angry at George, to demand answers. But that was difficult when the engineer looked to be on the verge of tears. In fact, Tommy felt a little awkward. "Listen, I'm serious, alright? You and I are the most Force-sensitive people here, and I need to know if you're feeling everything I am."

George was silent. The engineer's dark eyes drifted over the ruined landscape, and Tommy barely kept from asking another question: *Can you feel them, too?* Hundreds of thousands of death echoes haunted level 2, wailing the tragedies of their lives. A terrible event had happened here, years ago.

Suddenly, George inhaled sharply. "I can't feel anything," the engineer said flatly. "Because I'm not letting myself. Not after what happened up there."

Tommy wasn't sure if he wanted to scoff or scream. "How can you not let yourself feel anything?" he demanded. "What's the fucking point of you scouting if *you can't feel anything?* You and I are-

"We're *not* the same, Tommy."

George's tone was as cutting as a sword. A flash of hurt crossed Tommy's mind before he buried the emotion deep in his chest. George didn't want to talk. Tommy understood that.

But the comment still stung.

A few minutes passed in silence. Then George heaved a heavy sigh.

"I'm sorry," the engineer muttered. "I'm not good at... doesn't matter. You're right, Tommy. We're both strong with the Force. We just had very different upbringings. I'm glad you got stuck with Wilbur. He's a good man."

Once upon a time, Tommy would have made a snide comment about how Wilbur wasn't that good. But now, it just felt mean. "Who was your Master?" Tommy asked quietly. "I've heard all about how you were a padawan when you were exiled, but no one's ever mentioned who your Master was."

George's smile was humorless. "I'm not surprised," the shorter man chuckled. The sound was as cold as his smile. "He probably kept his name from all the official reports. Cho-Nal, if you'd believe it."

Cho-Nal? But... Cho-Nal was a bitch. How had a man like *that* trained George, who had grown to be so caustic and stubborn and determined?

...alright, maybe the similarities were there.

"You didn't answer my first question," Tommy noted. He didn't really care anymore; he just wanted to stop thinking about how George and Cho-Nal had once been Master and Padawan.

Luckily, George humored him. "I hurt Wilbur, Tommy. And that was all the way up on level 1498. I'm not stable right now, and leaving myself open to the Force while being down here didn't seem like a great idea."

"But what's the point then?" Tommy asked, half-confused, half-annoyed. "I mean, what's the point of you searching for Dream and Techno with you if you can't even feel their presences?"

George's face creased in a slight frown, and the engineer shoved his hands into his pockets. "I can still feel presences," the shorter man muttered defensively. "Like, I can feel you and Wilbur and Philza... it's just fuzzy."

"Again, how does that work if you're closed off from the Force?"

George didn't say anything. Slowly, Tommy realized that the conversation was over, and he returned his attention to their surroundings. Level 2 stretched endlessly around them. The only break in the monotony of greens and grays and browns was a teal light shooting into the air. Tommy suddenly decided that he really didn't want to be in the middle of level 2 and picked up the pace. George did the same.

A few minutes later, the two of them rounded a cluster of vine-wrapped stones and were greeted with the sight of a small camp. Four speeder bikes formed a protective circle, with one of the headlights twisted to the ceiling to act as a beacon. Philza knelt next to one bike, and Wilbur leaned another, eyes roving the landscape.

Tommy slid over the ring of speeder bikes and settled next to his Master. He didn't mean to make such a beeline, but... it just kind of happened. "How you feeling?" Tommy murmured. "You look like shit."

"And you're pale as death," Wilbur returned. They gave each other tired smiles, then Wilbur's face dropped back into a frown. "Anything?"

"Nothing." Tommy sighed. He leaned back like Wilbur was, and his Master slung an arm around his shoulders. For some reason, Tommy didn't feel the urge to push Wilbur away. "George didn't feel anything either."

"Not surprising, given that he's not receiving the Force right now."

"I'm not even going to ask how you know that." Tommy looked over at the two other members of their party. George had settled himself onto his speeder bike, and Philza still knelt with eyes closed. "What's Philza doing?"

"Meditating," Wilbur muttered. "He's been like that ever since you left. I don't know why he's trying, to be honest. There's... you know how it feels."

Tommy did. Even sitting next to Wilbur, tendrils of emotion tugged at his arms, questioning his morals. Tommy ignored all of them the best he could.

"How's your head?"

The question came so far out of left field, Tommy almost giggled. "What?" he asked, managing to keep his hysterics at bay.

Wilbur tapped Tommy's head, and Tommy batted the invasive hand away. "How's your head?" his Master repeated fondly. "You've done a lot today, Tommy. Not to mention, you didn't exactly sleep last night. You doing alright?"

Tommy considered his mental state for a couple of seconds. He was exhausted from having only slept a grand total of six hours on their trip down here (it had taken them almost 22 hours, so it had to be around... 4 am, at the moment?). Tommy had a headache from the mask's filtered air, and the amount of Dark Side power had reduced Tommy's legs to little more than jelly.

"I'm fine," Tommy mumbled eventually.

Wilbur squeezed Tommy's shoulder. "I know you are."

Their bond was the only spark of light Tommy had left. He clung to Wilbur's Force presence as if it were a buoy in a raging ocean, which it kind of was. Luckily, Wilbur hadn't yet commented on how unsteady Tommy was. But as they sat together, Tommy felt a fresh wave of energy touch his fatigued mind. He leaned his head against Wilbur's shoulder. It was the only way he could express his gratitude.

For almost fifteen minutes, that was how things stayed. Philza meditated, George brooded, and Tommy let his brain shut off. Without the worries of their mission plaguing his mind, Tommy's thoughts drifted to Tubbo.

Around 5 pm the previous day, Philza had presented Tommy with a communicator and said to call Tubbo. To Tommy's delight, the other padawan had picked up on the first ring, and they'd spent almost an hour talking. Eventually, Tubbo had been called away by Sapnap, but Tommy had ended the call with a smile. He was happy that Tubbo was happy. Tommy planned to call his partner in crime again on their way back up, just to make sure that Tubbo was still doing alright without him.

Tommy let his eyes flutter shut. A nap couldn't hurt, right? After all... he needed to rest if he was to function at his best. If he was really needed, Wilbur could wake him up.

Then something exploded to life in his mind.

Tommy sat bolt upright, instinctively reaching out for the presence. The initial shockwave had already vanished, and in the quagmire of level 2's darkness, Tommy could barely feel anything. But something still called out to him. It burned a fierce red, as bright as a sun.

Techno.

"Techno!" Tommy shouted aloud. He immediately realized that his call did nothing to summon the pig Jedi, but Philza whipped around to face him.

"You feel him, too?" Philza demanded. Tommy nodded frantically, still trying to hold onto Techno's faint presence, and the blond man scrambled to his feet. "Everyone, get on your bikes! We've got Techno!"

Tommy hauled Wilbur to his feet, then threw himself onto his bike. Philza took off into the gloom, Tommy a second behind them. Wilbur and George quickly followed suit, so Tommy devoted all of his energy to seeking out Techno.

The pig Jedi's presence was already fading. But there was a spark left. Techno was clearly trying to hold on for as long as he could, waving a flag for Tommy and Philza to follow.

Tommy glanced over at Philza. After a moment, the Jedi Master glanced back at him, and Tommy saw the same fire in Philza's eyes that he felt in his bones.

They'd found Dream and Techno.

---

"Dream!"

Clay snapped to awareness. He sat with a gasp, instinctively lashing out at whatever had finally come to kill him. Instead of meeting sharpened teeth, Clay's hands bounced harmlessly off of someone else's. Slowly, he registered Techno standing over him with a manic look.



“Techno?” Clay asked nervously. “What is it?”

Techno turned away from him, and Clay heaved a sigh of relief. For a split second, he'd thought that the pig Jedi was going to attack him. Something in Techno's eyes had looked... unhinged.

“I got them!” Techno called over his shoulder. The other man knelt beside the riverbank, and his explanation paused as he slurped up handfuls of water. “Phil and Tommy! They're somewhere out there!”

Clay's heart nearly punched through his chest. “What?” he demanded, shoving himself to his elbows. Techno hurried back over to him and held out a hand, and Clay gratefully accepted the help, allowing the pig Jedi to hobble him over to the riverbank. Clay drank as much water as his sticky throat would allow, then straightened. “You're sure?” he asked again. “You're absolutely fucking sure that you're not hallucinating?”

Techno shook his head. “No. I *know* that Phil and Tommy are down here with us.”

“How?”

“I screamed as loudly as I could into Phil's and my bond. I don't know how, but it worked, and we reconnected. I can barely feel him, but he's steady again. Then Tommy's presence popped up, and I-” Techno's face screwed into a frown. “Look, if I was hallucinating, I'd probably wish for Wilbur to come and save me or something. Why would I pick Tommy?”

The logic was solid enough. Besides... hope had reinvigorated Clay's heart and lifted his spirits. He and Techno might really be able to escape. Their friends might have come to save them.

They wouldn't die down here.

Clay fisted his hand in the back of Techno's tunic and nodded tightly. “Lead the way,” he said, praying that his voice didn't shake.

Techno's eyes glinted with new energy. “I'll get us out of here, Dream. I promise.”

“I trust you.”

And gods-damn it, Clay really did. As Techno led them away from the river, Clay realized that he trusted Techno with everything he had left. The pig Jedi *would* get them out safely. Clay didn't doubt that for a second.

Who would have thought that life-or-death situations really did bring people together?

Eventually, the river became a distant speck, and Clay again surrendered all sense of direction. The marshland seemed to grow even hazier the more they walked. Soon, Clay didn't even know which direction they'd come from. All the plants looked the same. Ground and haze stretched endlessly, and for a hysterical second, Clay wondered if the marshland had finally decided to kill them. Without the river, he and Techno would die of dehydration.

The only thing that kept Clay from collapsing was Techno. The other man walked with unwavering confidence, and stubborn determination burned in his blood-red eyes. Techno whole-heartedly believed that Philza and Tommy were somewhere out there, past the haze. Clay had to believe that was true, too.

If it wasn't, he and Techno had just doomed themselves.

More time passed. Clay wasn't sure how they walked. The marshland had officially destroyed his internal clock, and even as he wracked his brain, Clay couldn't figure out how long he and Techno had been stuck here. Had it been days? A week? No, it couldn't have been a week... right?

"Techno?" Clay rasped. The pig Jedi met his gaze evenly. "I'm getting worse. I don't... I don't know how long it's been anymore. When... when did we leave the river?"

Techno hesitated. "I don't know," the other man admitted after a long pause. That answer was not what Clay wanted. "I'm just... I'm following Phil. I'm not doing so good either, Dream. I'm getting dizzy."

Clay nodded slightly. "Yeah. Just keep moving."

The two of them continued their awkward hobble. Clay let his eyes slip shut, and his heartbeat slowed to match the cadence of Techno's shuffling steps. Each beat came slower, and Clay's lungs ached with each breath he took. Was the Force trying to kill him? It wouldn't be the first time.

"Dream? Dream, wake up. C'mon, stay with me."

A sharp elbow dug into Clay's side, and he jerked upright. "I'm here," he blurted. He quickly realized how much he was listing to the side and flushed slightly. "Thanks."

"You're welcome," Techno muttered back. The pig Jedi's eyes stayed focused on a distant point, and Clay almost smiled at the sight. Techno hadn't given up.

Unfortunately, Clay's body was not as determined as he was to stay awake. With absolutely nothing else to do, Clay began counting the plants. At first, he wondered if he was just going to drive himself insane even faster. Then Clay noticed something very interesting.

The plants were changing.

No longer was the landscape decorated by little bushes and sickly ferns. Instead, the flora had become sprawling vines and clumps of radiant flowers. Though Clay's head ached worse than ever before, the haze was clearing. Even the ground had changed from sienna-green to dark brown.

"Techno," Clay murmured. "Look. The plants..."

The other man's eyes flicked to a nearby fern, and Techno's eyebrows raised into his hairline. "That's new," he noted softly. "Dream... you know what that means?"

"Yeah." Clay didn't want to say it aloud. If he voiced his silent hope, then the Force might dash it away. That *couldn't* happen.

For the next hour or so, the marshland gradually shifted into something like an underground plain. Then, like a flash of lightning, everything changed.

The haze completely disappeared. Clay's head cleared, and for the first time since he'd woken up, he felt in control and sane. The plants became vines that crept across hardened soil, and on the distant horizon, a wall of brown and black disappeared into the space where the ceiling should have been.

A wall. An end.

Clay looked at Techno. The pig Jedi stared back with the faintest hint of a smile.

"Is that what I think it is?" Clay breathed, barely able to get the words out.

Techno's mouth stretched into a genuine smile. "Yeah," the other man said, huffing a laugh. "Yeah. That's a wall. We're- we're going to get out of here, Dream. I can feel Phil and Tommy out there, even..." Techno's eyes widened. "Dream, Wilbur and George are out there, too."

For a moment, Clay was entirely numb. Then his stomach bottomed out, and giddy excitement filled the vat in his heart where hopelessness had carved out a hole. "Get us to that wall," Clay ordered. "I'm going to reach out. Maybe I'll be able to feel them."

Techno gave a delighted laugh and began hurrying them towards the wall. Clay's ankle wailed at the sudden hustle, but Clay didn't complain. They were almost *free*.

As they ran, Clay hesitantly opened up his mind again. Everything returned to him in a glorious rush. He felt Techno glowing with joy next to him, reaching out just like Clay was. Tubbo was far, far above them, sleeping peacefully. And... beyond the wall...

Philza was the first one that Clay felt. The Jedi Master's dazzling presence was as bright as a beacon, shining brilliant green infused with hints of red (which Clay didn't quite understand. He chalked it up to his exhaustion). Next to Philza was Tommy. The padawan's ocean blue presence shone as strongly as Philza's, which meant that he'd probably connected to Techno. Wilbur was somewhere behind them, nowhere near as bright but still a warm amber. And, finally...

It was almost indecipherable amongst the overwhelming power flowing from Philza and Tommy. But beyond the three Jedi was a faint blue presence humming with worry and fear.

George. George had come to save him.

Clay let out an incredulous laugh. He felt as light as air, and he dragged Techno a little faster. The pig Jedi didn't even try to stop him. The two of them hurtled across the now-solid ground, racing towards their escape.

Time passed in an incorporeal flow. Slowly, painfully slowly, the distant wall solidified. It moved at a snail's pace, but gods-damn it, *it got closer*.

"We're almost there," Clay whispered. He clenched his hand tighter in the back of Techno's shirt, and the pig Jedi squeezed his shoulder in response. "Techno... we're getting out of here."

"I know," Techno chuckled back. The pig Jedi sounded almost breathless. "We made it."

The last leg of their journey boiled down to nothing. One second, Clay was straining to reach the wall. The next, he stood directly before it. Clay and Techno stared up at the gargantuan formation, and for a moment, Clay was tempted to flip it off.

*You couldn't keep us in here*, Clay thought. A triumphant grin touched his face. *We won, you motherfucker.*

Directly in front of the wall, the ground dipped to form a tunnel leading into darkness. Clay assumed that it was some sort of old escape tunnel that got people in and out of this hellish cavern, and the description seemed apt. At the very least, it was his and Techno's escape.

"Let's go," Techno murmured, breaking Clay from his reverie. The pig Jedi led them down the small slope and towards the open mouth of the tunnel.

Clay took his first step towards freedom.

And his mind became a fireball.

A million and one thoughts suddenly crashed into Clay's tender brain, driving spikes through his skull and shrieking like demons. Clay was vaguely aware of Techno shouting his name, but he couldn't form words through the cacophony. Slowly, the pandemonium began to settle. But as the thoughts faded and the voices drifted away, one thought remained, as bright as a neon sign.

*Danger.*

“Dream! *Dream!* Gods, why did you have to do this now?!”

“I'm back,” Clay gasped, blinking rapidly. He and Techno stood just inside the tunnel's mouth, the pig Jedi staring at him worriedly. “I'm okay. There's- okay, listen. Something's wrong, Techno. I don't... I don't like this tunnel.”

Techno frowned. “You don't really get a say in the matter, Dream. We're going through whether you like it or not.”

Clay waved a frustrated hand. “I know that,” he snapped. “That's not the problem. There's...”

*Danger. Danger. Danger.*

There was no point in explaining. It would just burn valuable time, and Clay and Techno were both probably a little fucked in the head after everything they'd been through. “Just be careful,” Clay settled on saying aloud. “There's something bad down here.”

Techno's frown didn't fade. “Alright,” the pig Jedi said quietly. “Let me know if you feel anything else.”

Clay nodded mutely. They plunged into the tunnel.

The darkness instantly swallowed them whole. Clay's eyes adjusted after a couple of seconds, but all there was to see were weathered walls, a gravel floor, and the cuts and crevices that pockmarked the ceiling at random angles. But a sinister feeling lurked in the tunnel. It pricked at Clay's senses, threatening to overwhelm him as it had outside the tunnel. Clay kept his head down.

He and Techno couldn't afford to stop now.

Only a few minutes passed before something changed. The air cleared, and light exuded from somewhere. And... the tunnel was sloping up.

Clay glanced at Techno again, and the pig Jedi shot him a faint grin.

They'd really done it.

The two of them limped up the last incline and found themselves in a small room. The far wall was made of smooth stone, and beyond the wall, four Force presences radiated light and love and *freedom*.

Techno stopped in front of the wall and narrowed his eyes. “Dream, I gotta put you down,” the pig Jedi said after a few moments of silence. “I'm gonna try to break this wall, alright?”

“That's fine,” Clay sighed happily.

The other man carefully lowered him to the floor, and Clay finally let his body collapse. He slumped against the wall, letting his head loll to the side and his legs go limp. Gods, he was never

going to complain about anything ever again. Even dealing with the Council for four straight years had been a field day compared to this hell.

*“Oh, is that so? We aren't scary anymore?”*

Clay's heart froze.

*Oh, gods, please, no... no more...*

Clay sat bolt upright. The Council stood in a half-circle on the other side of the room, each of them pinning Clay in place with a piercing stare. There was something... menacing about the way that each Jedi was looking at him.

Not to mention the fact that the Council *shouldn't fucking be in the Underworld.*

“Techno?” Clay croaked. “Techno, you seeing this, too?”

No response. Clay glanced to his left, and his heart shot into his throat.

Techno was gone.

*“He's already left, Dream. Did you really think that he'd stick around for you?”*

Clay whirled to face the Council again, sheer terror seeping through his body. All twelve Council members stared at him. Mazenos and Dante stood to one side, both of them sneering nastily. Jahra, Ippu, Delphina, and Cho-Nal stood on the other side, hands folded and mouths curved in twisted smiles. Four other Jedi lined the walls, but Clay didn't pay them any attention. His focus was on the two Jedi standing at the head of the ramp.

Philza and Eret.

*“What, you didn't expect us to be here?”* Philza asked cheerfully. *“That's a shock. We're always with you, Dream. Always.”*

Clay twisted, desperately searching for Philza's presence beyond the wall. But it wasn't there. It stood directly in front of him, glowing happily. It even contained streaks of red.

Philza tutted lightly, *“Sorry, Dream,”* the Jedi Master chuckled. *“I was never out there. I was in here, waiting for you. You never had a chance of escaping. Never.”*

“No,” Clay gasped. His head pounded, and for the first time, doubt touched his mind. What if... what if everything had been in his head? What if Techno had died somewhere out in the marshland, and Clay had been hobbling along by himself? What if Philza and the others had never been out there? After all... Clay hadn't felt them until this last stretch. He'd been following Techno the whole time.

Eret took his turn to chuckle. The sound snapped Clay out of his head, and he watched, horrified, as the Jedi Master advanced on him,

*“It's okay, Dream,”* Eret said softly. The other man crouched in front of Clay and tipped his chin up with a gentle hand. Clay recoiled from the touch. It was warm... *real.* *“We'll keep you company until you die. You know you're going to die, right? You're going to die in this miserable little hole, and no one will ever find you. It's comforting, isn't it? In the end, you're as mortal as everyone else. No more pain.”*

Clay wanted to be angry. He wanted to scream at the Council to leave him the fuck alone and let him go! But he couldn't. His body wasn't responding to his commands. All Clay could do was sit in mute terror as Eret ran a gentle finger along the side of his face, tracing one of his scars.

*"We'll take care of you," Eret murmured. "Death is easy. I promise."*

A single tear slid down Clay's cheek.

## Chapter End Notes

...

What? You think that was easy for me? No! I was crying while I wrote this chapter, too!

As always, thank you so much for reading! If you are so inclined, please leave a comment and let me know what you thought! Your feedback means the world to me <3 (oh, and to everyone who has left comments on the previous two chapters... I want you to know that I appreciate you from the bottom of my heart. I'll be going back and responding to y'all's kind words soon!)

By the way, exciting news! Next week will be the finale of this arc! You'd better get mentally prepared now... just a warning.

Have a wonderful week, and I'll see you all next Friday! (Yes, my posting schedule is finally going back to normal!)

# Unbreakable, Part 5

## Chapter Notes

Good evening, everyone! (Morning? It's official, my schedule is ruined.) Welcome to the conclusion of what I believe is the longest arc thus far! I've returned with 15k crafted out of love and tears, and... hoo boy. This one was... quite the experience, I'll say that much. Remember how I told you last week to mentally prepare? I really hope you did.

Without any further ado, let's get right into the story. Welcome, my friends, to the finale of Unbreakable!

Trigger warning for graphic violence, emotional/psychological torture, and breakdowns. (I'm serious about this one, y'all. Take care of yourselves.)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

A boulder emerged from the gloom, and George swore under his breath, swerving his speeder bike around the sudden obstacle. His heartbeat hammered in his ears, but George ignored it. Where had Philza and Tommy gone? Gods, in the single fucking second that George had looked down, he'd completely lost them!

There! The two blonds were little more than blurs among the haze, dodging around boulders and buildings that George had no chance of seeing.

*They're using the Force*, a little voice supplied innocently. *You wouldn't be flirting with death if you did the same.*

*Shut up*, George snapped back.

But the truth was that George was narrowly escaping a collision each time a new obstacle presented itself. He was wasting time. George gritted his teeth, swallowed his pride, and set his speeder bike's homing beacon on Philza. With a confirmative beep, the bike overrode the manual controls and shot forward. George's heart nearly crawled up his throat at the sudden acceleration.

Without the strain of high-speed driving to distract him, George's thoughts started to make themselves known. Everything was finally sinking in. When George had volunteered to “save Dream and Techno,” he hadn't realized what that would entail. He'd assumed that he and a few others would sneak into some hidden facility, break Dream and Techno out of a measly prison cell, and be back to the Temple within a day. He had never been more wrong.

Another ruined building whipped past. George gasped at the near-miss, and his lungs immediately strained to replenish the lost oxygen. The air in level 2 was suffocating, even with a mask. George didn't know if the haze was made by toxic fumes or the Force, but ultimately, it didn't matter. They were close enough to the verge that the Dark Side of the Force whispered sweet nothings into his ear.

*It's completely abandoned down here. With all this power, you could do anything you wanted. You know that Dream and Techno are probably dead. All it would take is a flick of your fingers, and*

*Wilbur and Tommy would go flying. Then you could kill Philza. They all abandoned you, remember?*

George grimaced. The voices had only gotten stronger the deeper they'd gone. But George didn't give a single shit. Up in the 1500s, turning around had been a viable option. But giving up or giving in now? Unacceptable.

Not with Dream and Techno so close.

Dream? No. Clay.

The disconnect frightened George. He'd somehow convinced himself that their goal was to rescue Dream and Techno, but that had never been the case. They were trying to save *Clay*, and dear gods, George's best friend was going to die if he didn't *hurry the fuck up*.

Philza suddenly faded into the haze, and George let out a startled yelp as his bike veered after its leader. *Gods, I need to calm down*, George thought, a little hysterically. He bent forward and pressed his forehead to the cool metal of the handlebars.

There was no peace to be found in his fractured mind. Gods, what if Clay died? George hadn't allowed himself to think about it thus far, but down here in level 2, he couldn't ignore reality. They'd come so far, but... Clay might have already run out of time. After all, Philza and Tommy had only felt Techno's Force presence. What if... what if Clay...

*No!*

A surge of anger swept away George's fear. He snarled, grabbing the bike's handles and squeezing as tightly as he could. Philza and Tommy had picked up speed, but their taillights were still visible- and George's reactions were better than a computer's would ever be. George slammed his foot against the accelerator, and with a shudder, the bike relinquished control.

*How far?* George thought, beaming his question to Philza.

The Jedi Master held out five fingers. Just then, their group flew across a broken intersection, and Philza dropped a finger.

Four more streets.

George revved the engine and launched forward.

Now that he was once again in control, the fog seemed to lessen. George no longer felt lost and blind. Instead, he *knew* where each building or boulder was going to be before it appeared.

*It's the Force*, the little voice in George's head noted mildly. *You've used it over the years without even realizing it, you know. The Force isn't bad. It never has been. Its "alignment" is based entirely on how you respond to its power.*

*Shut the fuck up*, George snapped again.

But the voice brought up a point that George had been steadfastly avoiding since his return to the Temple. He'd cut himself off from the Force so that he'd never be hurt by it again. But it wasn't the Force's fault that he'd been exiled. It wasn't even the Council's, really.

It had been his actions and his actions alone.



Maybe it was time to accept that.

*George! Get out of your head!*

Philza's sharp command broke George from his reverie, and he quickly realized that they'd crossed three more major intersections during his introspective moment. *Almost there*, George thought nervously, clutching the handlebars. *Gods, Clay, please still be alive. Please tell me that you held on.*

They whipped across the last intersection.

Like a curtain being drawn back, the fog cleared.

"Oh, fuck," George hissed, and he slammed the brakes. His bike came to a screeching halt, kicking up dust and dirt and moss. George spat out a few more choices words and narrowed his eyes against the silt. Finally, everything settled. With fear beating a frantic double step on his ribcage, George slid off his bike and gazed up at the unavoidable obstacle before them.

A gigantic wall blocked their path. It reached up into the hazy space where a ceiling should have been and stretched into infinity to the left and right. *Did we reach the center of the planet?* George thought dazedly. *No, we're too high up... what is this?*

It wasn't the time to ponder topography.

George shook himself back into the present. Philza, Wilbur, and Tommy had all abandoned their bikes nearby and converged on an oddly smooth section of wall. The smoothness was bizarre amongst the craggy edges and jutting ledges, but there was something... darker about it. George's hair stood up on end. But Philza was gesturing wildly at him, so George reluctantly jogged over to the group.

"What is this?" George asked once he joined the other three next to the wall. Now that he'd gotten closer, the dark feeling was even more potent. "It doesn't feel right. There's something awful in there."

Philza stared at the wall with a frigid glare. Danger glinted in the Jedi Master's eyes, and that little voice in the back of George's head whispered to him once again. *Beware*. What was he supposed to beware? Philza? The Jedi Master wouldn't hurt him.

Right?

"There's definitely something in there," Philza muttered. "Alright, stand back."

Wilbur shot the Jedi Master a worried look. "Phil, what are you going to do?"

Philza brushed the taller man off wordlessly. George's sensitivity again warned him that he wasn't safe, and he took a cautious step back.

*Kill them all. They don't care about you, only Dream and Techno.*

*Philza is dangerous.*

"Shut up," George bit out. Gods, why had his own personal angel and devil decided to show up now? "Nothing is wrong. I am fine."

*Don't be a fool. Philza carries a hint of the Dark Side, and you know that. He has since you*

*returned to the Temple.*

George hesitated. Philza's jaw was set, and his fists were clenched. Maybe... maybe the “angel” in George's mind was right. Philza wasn't evil (George knew that for sure), but the Jedi Master also seemed the least affected by the power clogging the air. What if something went wrong?

*The gods will protect us*, George thought, and he barely kept from collapsing into hysterical giggles. If the gods had wanted to protect him, they would have done so years ago. George was on his own.

*Your safety, or the protection of your friends? Make your decision.*

George refused to let things go to hell because of his inadequacy *again*. He took a deep breath, planted his feet, and finally, *finally* allowed the power he carried around to spark.

It felt like wildfire. George gritted his teeth against the burn, and slowly, the familiar hum of the Force settled into his mind. And, somehow... the Dark Side of the Force was nowhere to be found. George had expected to feel some sort of darkness, given the power that surrounded him. But no. He was alert and in control.

*I'm here*, the Force whispered. *What do you want me to do?*

George inhaled shakily. It had been so long since his last conversation with the Force, yet it felt like greeting an old friend. He could do this. He *wouldn't* fall apart.

*What's wrong with Philza?* George asked.

The Force hummed for a moment, then extended its tendrils to each of George's three companions. Wilbur's and Tommy's Force presences were bright, but they were nothing compared to Philza's blinding radiance. It roared a brilliant forest green. But hints of crimson drifted through Philza as well, and those wisps felt... different.

That didn't matter. What concerned George was the flux of emotions raging around Philza like an ocean storm. Most prominent was pure, unfiltered fury. Philza was two seconds away from snapping.

*Why?* George asked the Force.

*Techno is suffering.*

*What?*

*Technoblade is close to giving up his life. Can't you feel it?*

George frantically cast his mind beyond the smoothed wall. He was immediately engulfed by some sort of thick smog, but he could still clearly feel two Force presences writhing in pain. One was blood red, exhausted and dim. The other was emerald green, streaked with anguish.

Clay and Techno. Oh, thank the fucking gods, they were *still alive*.

*Yes, both live. But if Philza is allowed to enter first, his anger will be the match that sets all of you alight. You must either stop him or calm him down.*

“Wait!” George blurted. Philza turned to face him, and George swallowed nervously at the rage boiling in the Jedi Master's icy eyes. But he couldn't back down. “Philza, you're angry. Let me do

it.”

Philza's dizzying power eased ever so slightly. “Do what?” the Jedi Master asked slowly.

*What am I supposed to do?* George whispered to the Force. The Force gave no reply, and George ground his teeth. Of course, the little fucker would shut up now that he *really* needed help. “I don't know,” George muttered aloud. “Just... step aside, Philza. Let me do it.”

A glimmer of something indecipherable flickered in Philza's eyes. Slowly, the Jedi Master shuffled aside, the storm around him calming with each step. Good. At least they wouldn't have to physically restrain Philza.

All that was left between George and Clay was the fucking smoothed section of wall.

George held out his hands. The Force hummed curiously as his call, and for once, George couldn't find it in himself to be mad. The Force wasn't his pet. It was a power beyond his understanding that he had been granted a piece of.

*What would you have me do?* the Force asked.

*Take away the wall.*

*You have the power to do that yourself. Let me show you.*

George latched his fingers around the edges of the walls, breaking a seal that had laid dormant for hundreds of years. George inhaled deeply. Then he pulled with everything he had. The wall came crashing down and shattered on the floor like old pottery. For a split second, George felt a quiet thrill of pride. He'd done it!

Then he noticed the Force power drifting from the new hole. It brushed against his mental shields, and George almost blacked out. It was so fucking *cold*. George had strayed close to death a handful of times but never had he felt something so soul-sucking. He was freezing and burning, being torn apart and crushed into pieces. Gods, he *couldn't breathe*.

“Oh, Holy fucking Kantos,” Wilbur groaned from somewhere nearby. George couldn't even see the taller man through his tears. “George, what the fuck did you do?”

George tried to rasp that he didn't know, but the steady stream of power shoved itself down his throat, cutting off his words. George gagged and coughed. It did nothing to ease the darkness seeping into his mind. He was dying, he was-

*“George!”*

Philza. Philza needed him.

With a monumental effort, George wrenched the slug of power from his throat. The haze in his head evaporated, and George sat up with a rattling gasp. When had he laid down? No, that didn't matter. Where was Philza?

It took a few seconds for George's vision to clear. Once it did, he found Philza kneeling at the edge of the hole. George coughed the last of the chill from his lungs, then hurried to the blond man's side. Beyond the hole was... nothing but an empty cave with a tunnel leading into darkness. Philza was grabbing at thin air.

“What are you doing?” George demanded, frustrated and slightly worried. Philza said nothing, and

George's impatience overtook him. "Come on," he ordered, swinging one leg into the cave. "Clay and Techno have to be down the--"

Philza grabbed his shoulder and harshly wrenched him back "Don't go in there!" the blond man barked. "O you'll never make it out again. Now, for fuck's sake, help me grab Dream!"

*Clay?* George thought blearily. His head had been rattled by Philza's rough shove, but he *knew* that he hadn't seen Clay anywhere in the cave.

*He is there. You do not see the cave for what it truly is. That is its snare, its poison, and its fatal ability. Look again.*

A mist George hadn't even realized was present cleared. The floor of the cave was several feet deeper, and Clay pressed against the wall below them. Tears streamed down the taller man's face, his hands raised against an invisible enemy.

"Please," Clay croaked. "Eret, I didn't mean it. I didn't- it was everyone else, I swear! Don't-" Clay flinched and let out a pained noise. "*Please!* It wasn't- it wasn't- no, wait, Philza! Where are you going? Don't- don't leave me here! I can't-"

Clay crumpled in on himself with a pitiful whine. For a moment, George was frozen in place, horror sapping his strength away. *Dear gods... what happened to you?*

"Grab his arms!" Philza ordered. "*Now!*"

George's body restarted, and he nodded frantically, leaning into the cave. He wrapped his arms underneath Clay's, burying his face in the other man's hair as he did so. Clay didn't even react. He just waved his arms at something George prayed he'd never see.

Philza grabbed Clay's torso, and with a massive pull, they hauled Clay out of the cave. George tumbled back from the momentum, and since he'd positioned himself behind Clay, he was nearly crushed by the taller man's limp frame. Once the stars cleared from George's eyes, he shoved himself upright. Clay lay sprawled in between his legs.

"Clay?" George whispered. Clay didn't respond, and terror sunk vicious claws into George's heart. Were they too late? "Clay?" George repeated, a little desperately. "C'mon, Clay, talk to me."

Nothing. The Jedi Master's chest heaved with too-fast breaths, and his beautiful emerald eyes fixed on some distant point in space. George looked up, inhaling to shout for Philza. His words died in his throat.

Philza was lowering himself into the cave.

"What the fuck are you doing?" George shouted. His voice cracked on the "you," but he couldn't find the will to care. "You just said that we can't go in there!"

Philza dropped to the ground, then met George's gaze. A warm smile touched the Jedi Master's face. "I'll be fine!" Philza called. "When Wilbur and Tommy recover, tell them that I'm gonna need some help to get Techno out of here. Don't worry, George. I'll be right back."

Before George could verbalize any of his worries, Philza disappeared from view. For a split second, George almost sobbed. But he shoved all of his fear aside and turned his attention to the man in his lap.

Clay still hadn't moved. The taller man's hands jittered as if he was being shocked, and his eyes

rolled behind closed eyelids.

“Clay, stay with me,” George ordered. His voice wavered. “This is *such* a shitty place to die. You can't- you can't go out down here. I thought you wanted to die on top of the Temple or something.”

No reaction.

“Gods, you *stubborn son of a bitch*. Wake up.”

Still nothing.

George's fragile confidence shattered.

Tears flooded his eyes, and George hunched forward, barely fighting back a sob as he curled over Clay's shuddering form. “You can't die,” he whispered. “Not now. I- I just got back, Clay. Don't- don't do this. *Please*.”

George gently cradled Clay's cheeks. The many scars that ravaged the taller man's fair skin felt like wax, and the foreign feeling only fueled the fear that rattled around George's head like balls in a cage.

*Is he alive?* George whispered into the Force.

*Yes*, the Force whispered back. *He lives*.

*Will he survive?*

The Force said nothing. George's body began to tremble, and he rested his forehead against Clay's, burying his nose in the taller man's hair. It smelled like smoke and blood. George remembered when Clay used to smell of forests and sweetness and *life*.

“Breathe for me, Clay,” George choked out. “You're free.”

Time passed as a muddled sludge. George eventually ran out of tears, and all he could do was pray for a miracle that he knew wouldn't come. The gods had never loved them. Never. Why would that change now, after Clay had had an experience that would have already killed most people? Why would anything be different?

Clay's Force presence pulsed gently in George's mind. It was weak, but it hadn't faded away.

*You're not dead*, George thought wearily. *Not yet*.

Belatedly, George wondered why Philza was taking so long. A ragged smile stretched his face. Maybe Philza had gotten lost. That would be perfect, wouldn't it? Clay dies, Techno dies, Philza dies – the Temple's three strongest Jedi. George, Wilbur, and Tommy would return to the Temple with broken spirits and bloodied hearts.

A hysterical laugh built in George's chest. *Is this what you wanted, you sadistic fuck?* he thought. He'd never met Aries (had never even heard the name before this investigation), but he hated the man from the depths of his soul. *Was this your plan for the Order all along? Destroy us-*

Clay stopped twitching.

George's heart shot back to life. He quickly straightened from his hunched position and watched, desperately hopeful, as Clay reached a shaking hand towards him.

“George?” the taller man croaked. Clay's emerald eyes cleared, and slowly, they rolled back to meet George's gaze. “G-George. Are you real?”

It felt like George had been plunged four years into the past. He was as raw and emotional as he had been back then, and he swallowed back hot tears. “I'm real,” he mumbled. “I'm here.”

“N-no,” Clay stuttered. The taller man broke into rough coughs, and George winced at the sound. Right, Clay didn't have a breathing mask. They had brought extras, but George refused to get up and break this moment. “You-you're not real. The Council was real, too, and they-”

“I'm real,” George repeated gently. “I promise.”

Clay gazed up at him for a long, long moment. Finally, the blond man reached out a tentative, trembling hand. Clay's touch was so feather-light, George barely felt it. Then Clay settled his hand against George's cheek.

“You're here,” Clay whispered. A shaky smile spread across his face, quickly followed by fresh tears. “You... you saved me.”

George pressed into Clay's hand, and his stomach twisted into happy knots at his best friend's gasp. After a moment, Clay ran gentle fingers along his jaw. George's heart stuttered. “I'm always here,” he murmured, ignoring the fluttery feeling in his chest. “Come on, we need to get you a gas mask. Can you stand?”

A frown creased Clay's slack face. “Stand?” he slurred.

George grinned at that, and he ran a hand through Clay's hair. “Yeah,” he chuckled. “We're going home.”

A sleepy smile replaced Clay's frown, and his hand dropped back to his side with a dull thump. George stood, carefully hooking his arms beneath Clay's shoulders and hauling the other man to his feet. Just as George was about to head for his bike, another thought struck him. George turned and quickly picked out Wilbur and Tommy, both getting to their feet.

“Wilbur!” George called. The Jedi Master looked up, and George jerked his chin at their abandoned speeder bikes. “I'm getting Clay a gas mask! Help Philza!”

“Where'd the son of a bitch go?” Wilbur shouted back, his voice strained.

George grimaced. “Into the cave. He's getting Techno.”

Wilbur's eyes widened, and the Jedi Master quickly muttered something to Tommy. The two of them hurried over to the cave's mouth with identical shouts, so George turned his attention back to Clay. His best friend's eyelids fluttered like butterfly wings.

“Hold on, Clay,” George murmured. “You're safe.”

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As soon as Techno pressed his hand to the wall, he knew he'd made a terrible mistake. Dream's and Phil's Force presences vanished, replaced by a swirling void. In that same heartbeat, the landscape changed.

Techno was no longer trapped in a musty cave. Instead, he found himself staring out over the Jedi Temple bathed in moonlight. But... it wasn't the current Temple. It was older, more overgrown

with plants. It was how the Temple had looked before being demolished and rebuilt in the recent attacks.

Then Techno's heart kicked into overdrive. How had he gotten back to the Temple? His hallucinations had become more vivid as he and Dream had ventured further into the cave (at one point, Techno had even seen Augus wandering around in the mist), but never had he been so enveloped. And... if the Temple looked different... then...

Techno frantically patted the back of his head, where his hair should be. He was met with short fuzz and a dangling braid.

A padawan's braid.

His next two checks only confirmed his fears. Instead of the blood-red robes that Techno had been wearing for years, he was clothed in a mud-brown tunic and loose, black pants. He looked *terrible*. And... his old lightsaber hung in his belt. Techno gingerly flicked the hilt of the silver weapon. It gave a cheerful ping, and Techno's heart sank.

This was a different kind of hallucination, wasn't it? Techno could see no easy escape, nor any way to forcibly bring himself back to reality.

*"Techno? Techno, pay attention. I'm not gonna repeat myself."*

Techno's body suddenly stiffened up. He tried to frown, then realized that he couldn't move his face. He couldn't even blink.

*What's going on?* Techno demanded. His body started to turn to face the voice, and he struggled against the motion. *No! This isn't-*

His body finished its turn. Horror petrified Techno mid-rant.

A woman stood at the other end of the rooftop. Purple and gold robes swirled around her, and her silver skin reflected the moonlight like a still pond. Dark gray eyes watched Techno as intently as a predator's. And, for once, her jet black hair had been tied back in a high ponytail.

*"Did you hear me?"* the woman asked amusedly.

*Leave me alone!* Techno wanted to roar. *You're dead!*

But his mouth answered for him. *"Loud and clear, Master,"* a younger Techno said, and Techno almost gagged at the smile that tugged at his lips. This wasn't his body anymore. He shouldn't be back! *"But I still don't understand what we're doing here. It's almost midnight. If I get caught, they're not going to let me take the Trials next week."*

Ra-Lune chuckled. *"You won't get in trouble if we don't get caught, eh?"* she said with a conspiratorial wink. *"Come on. I wanna show you something."*

*No!* Techno bellowed. *Don't follow her again!* But his body wasn't his to control, so Techno could only watch as Ra-Lune took off across the Temple rooftops. A moment later, Techno's body followed his old Master with a quiet laugh despite all of Techno's protests.

This was wrong. This was all wrong. Techno had replayed this night over and over, and he'd always told himself that, if given a chance, he would do things differently. But... now it was clear that he couldn't. His past was set in stone.

Techno sat miserably as his younger self launched across the Temple rooftops. Ra-Lune leaped from ledge to ledge in from of him, glancing back every so often.

*I'm here*, Techno thought bitterly. *I can't exactly do anything else.*

*"Hurry up, Techno!"* Ra-Lune called. *"We're going to miss him!"*

What Techno wanted to spit was, "Don't say my name." What came out was, *"Him? I thought you said you wanted me to see 'something.' What's going on?"*

Ra-Lune's face split in a mischievous grin that Techno knew all too well. *"Don't worry about that,"* the Nagai drawled. *"It'll be fun!"*

His body was driven by the blind faith that Techno had always placed in his dear Master. Looking back, it pained Techno to see how naive he'd been. *My Master is different*, he'd thought. *My Master is better than the rest of the Order.* Gods, just how stupid could one kid be?

Finally, Ra-Lune landed on top of the Western Wing and waved wildly. Younger Techno happily joined her, though Techno's skin crawled at being in such close proximity. Then Ra-Lune slung an arm around his shoulders.

A scream built in Techno's chest, but he couldn't let it out.

*"What are we doing here?"* younger Techno asked. *"This is-"*

*"Where the Jedi Knights and Masters live,"* Ra-Lune agreed. She squeezed Techno's shoulder, and gods, the touch felt like a hot brand, then pointed across the way. *"Look over there. You see him?"*

Younger Techno squinted. Techno already knew who it was. Still, his eyes forced him to focus on the window that Ra-Lune indicated. Beyond the glass, a young man sat cross-legged on the floor. Neat, blond hair that was just starting to grow out drifted around his face, and pale skin poked out of loose robes. Techno's heart ached at the Force presence that emanated from the other man. It was so brilliant and strong and painfully *familiar*.

Eventually, younger Techno gave Ra-Lune a sideways glance and muttered, *"Of course I see him. Philza mediates whenever he can't sleep. I told you that, like, last week."*

Ra-Lune nodded absently, and with years more experience under his belt, Techno recognized the hungry edge in his former Master's eyes. *"Yeah, you did,"* she murmured. *"Alright, just wanted to make sure he was there. I have something to tell you, Techno."*

Younger Techno turned to Ra-Lune expectantly. The glint in the Nagai's eyes sent shivers down Techno's spine.

*"What is it, Master?"* younger Techno asked slowly.

Ra-Lune stood from her crouched position with a devious grin. The lanky woman drew her lightsaber from her belt and activated it, illuminating the rooftop with purple light. *"You know this old thing, right?"* Ra-Lune drawled. Younger Techno nodded. *"It's fake."*

Younger Techno frowned, but Techno heaved a silent sigh. All the pieces had been there... why hadn't he put it together?

*"Fake?"* younger Techno echoed. *"But... how can a lightsaber be fake? And you've taken that apart in front of me. I know it's real."*



Ra-Lune tsked lightly. *“That’s where you’re wrong, Padawan,”* she chuckled. *“C’mon, Techno, you’re smarter than this. Use that big brain of yours and figure things out.”*

Techno knew each piece of the puzzle by heart. Ra-Lune’s tendencies to fight with her fists rather than draw her lightsaber. The fact that she only used the Force to train Techno and had never tried to strengthen their bond. The holographic projector that Ra-Lune had hidden in her lightsaber to disguise its color “as a joke.”

It had always been there. Every piece.

Techno’s mouth suddenly began moving without his permission, and he tuned back in to what his younger self was saying.

*“-is fake,”* younger Techno muttered, his voice shaky with uncertainty. *“Then... that’s not its real color, is it?”*

*“Nope!”* Ra-Lune chirped.

In one smooth movement, the Nagai disassembled her lightsaber, dropped a piece of machinery onto the rooftop, then screwed the hilt back together. Instantly, the color changed. Instead of a vibrant, royal purple, Ra-Lune’s lightsaber glowed a deep, blood-red.

*“What?”* younger Techno gasped.

*Eloquent,* Techno thought dryly.

*“Jedi don’t have red lightsabers,”* younger Techno continued, unperturbed. Techno was mildly disappointed that his younger counterpart couldn’t hear his scorn. *“You made me read about that for weeks. Red lightsabers only form when... when...”*

The penny finally dropped for younger Techno, and Techno grimaced at the emotions that bloomed in his chest. He remembered them all too well: anger, disbelief, and a sick sense of betrayal that undermined everything else.

*“Red lightsabers only form when Kyber crystals get infected by the Dark Side,”* Ra-Lune finished, grinning widely. *“Guess what, Techno?”*

This time, Techno mouthed the words along with his younger self.

*“You’re a Sith.”*

Ra-Lune snapped her fingers at him. *“Bingo!”* the Nagai crowed. *“I don’t have an official Sith name since I killed my Master before she could give me one, but I think Ra-Lune works. Darth Lune has a nice ring to it. We might have to fix your name, though...”*

The cheer with which Ra-Lune carried herself made Techno’s blood boil. There she stood, destroying her padawan’s deepest foundations of belief, and she treated it as if it were a vacation. She must have wanted him to suffer. Why else would she have chosen such a cruel way to reveal herself?

*“Fix my name?”* younger Techno repeated incredulously. *“No! That’s insane! Master, I- No. No, I’m not calling you that.”*

Ra-Lune rolled her eyes, and she took a lazy step towards him. *“I’m still your Master, Padawan,”* the Nagai drawled. *“How long have we been together, eh? Almost seven years now. I’ve taught you*

*everything that you need to know about the Force in almost half the time of any other Master. And we ignored all the shit that doesn't really matter! I think that makes me your Master. I won't ask you to kill me yet, though. You still need to grow up a little."*

*"I'm not killing you!"* younger Techno protested. He backed up as far as he could, and Techno set his jaw (or, at least, tried to). This memory was coming to a close. *"I'm not doing anything with you! You're a Sith! How did you even stay hidden for so long?!"*

*"And you're not a Sith, Techno?"*

Even years later, Techno flinched at those six little words.

Ra-Lune cornered younger Techno against the rooftop's edge, and she tapped his forehead. Techno's skin burned at the touch. He used every ounce of his willpower to try to lash out, but his younger self just let the Nagai caress him. Ra-Lune had always been so, so physical.

*"I have my secrets,"* his former Master crooned, carving circles into the concrete with the tip of her lightsaber. *"One day, I'll tell you why no one found me. But for right now, you have to face it, Padawan. You were never normal. That's why I took you as my padawan. You have a talent that the Jedi don't understand; in fact, they despise it! What's the use in wasting such a precious gift?"*

*"What gift?"* younger Techno spat.

*"Anger, Techno. You know the taste of anger."* Ra-Lune's smile took on a manic edge. *"You can feel."* The Nagai took a step back and held out her arms. *"Don't you get it, Padawan? I never fully opened our bond because I knew you'd be scared of my power. But you're strong enough now."*

Ra-Lune held out a hand, and Techno's lightsaber flew from his belt. Younger Techno didn't react, but Techno desperately clawed at the weapon, growling in frustration as it slipped between his fingertips. Gods, why couldn't he have just held onto it? Why couldn't he have processed everything faster?!

*"There's just one last thing for you to do,"* Ra-Lune mused. She examined Techno's lightsaber for a moment, then held it back out to him. *"Kill Philza."*

Younger Techno barked out a harsh laugh. *"Are you insane?"* he snapped, and Techno allowed himself a cold smile at the certainty in his younger self's voice. *"I'm not going to kill Philza! What makes you think I'd even consider it?"*

Ra-Lune rolled her eyes. *"Oh, come on. You really think that he cares about you?"*

*"Yes!"*

*"Think again. He's a Jedi, Techno, just like all the other idiots in this Temple. They hate us, don't they? They hate us because 'argh, the Sith use their emotions instead of ignoring them, how evil.' They're fucking losers. Philza was raised as one of them. Why would he be any different?"*

Younger Techno hesitated. But Techno already knew his answer. Phil was different because he wanted to reform the Order. Phil was different because, ever since their first meeting, he'd listened to Techno with an attentive ear and an easy laugh. Phil was different because, during their very first sparring match, Techno had found his equal.

And Phil wasn't the only one. Wilbur had approached Techno during that stupid padawan competition, and the two of them had hit it off. Because of that fateful day, when Ra-Lune had offered him the lightsaber and told him that everyone hated him, Techno had known one thing for

sure.

She was lying.

“No,” younger Techno growled. Techno's body shifted into a fighting stance, and while he winced at how exposed he left himself, Techno gratefully accepted the call to action. Time to live out this last, fateful battle. *“Philza is different. I'm not going to kill him, and I'm not joining you. Guess what, Master? You raised a Jedi, just like you were supposed to.”*

Ra-Lune's charcoal eyes flashed dangerously. *“Don't do this, Padawan,”* she warned. Her voice trembled with barely-contained rage. *“Don't throw your gift away because of one man.”*

Techno glared in unison with his younger self. *“It's not a gift,”* he snapped. *“Everyone knows how to feel.”*

*“Kill him, or I will!”* Ra-Lune bellowed. She gripped Techno's lightsaber with white knuckles.

Techno narrowed his eyes at the woman who had lied to him for his entire childhood. He planted his feet and clenched his fists, and for just a moment, he relished in the confusion that flashed across Ra-Lune's face. “Your feet won't leave this rooftop,” Techno snarled.

Ra-Lune's slender face contorted in rage. *“So be it,”* the Nagai hissed. *“I'd always wondered if Philza was more important to you than I was. Now I know. Maybe if he's dead, you'll understand.”*

Techno already knew it was coming. However, he still winced as Ra-Lune carved his precious lightsaber into five smoldering pieces. Younger Techno howled in rage, but Techno ignored it and followed Ra-Lune's progress off the roof. He knew how this went. He would catch Ra-Lune's foot with the Force, drag the Nagai back, and then they'd have their last duel.

Then something in the air changed.

Techno reached for Ra-Lune's foot as he knew he was supposed to. But nothing happened. The Force didn't come to his aid; it didn't even stir. Techno watched, dumbstruck, as Ra-Lune crashed through the window of Phil's room and began wrestling with the blond man.

*This isn't what happened,* Techno thought blankly. *What's going on?*

Suddenly, Techno's body exploded back to life. He gasped as all vestiges of numbness fled his limbs, leaving him weak and shaky. Techno collapsed against the rooftop wall and clung to the rough stone with aching fingers.

He was in control again. *This was real.*

“Techno! Get down here!”

Techno snapped to attention. He hauled himself to his feet and frantically cast his gaze around the courtyard below. His eyes immediately landed on Ra-Lune and Phil. The pair stood in a dried-up fountain, Ra-Lune holding her lightsaber to Phil's neck and Phil struggling weakly.

“I'm talking to you, Techno!” Ra-Lune bellowed. “Get down here, or his head drops to the ground!”

Phil's Force presence thrummed with panic, and Techno's chest became two sizes too tight.

“Alright, alright!” Techno shouted back. “Don't overreact!”

Techno launched off of the rooftop, steadfastly ignoring the string of *This isn't happening* that looped around his head like a broken holocom. Techno landed on the cobblestone and held his hands out placatingly.

*This isn't right.*

“Calm down, Ra-Lune,” Techno tried. He hadn't even attempted to reason with her the first time around. Maybe some part of his Master still believed in the logic and critical thinking that she'd so eagerly taught him. “You don't have to kill him.”

Something about Ra-Lune's posture had changed. Her eyes had lost their hungry edge, and her motions had tightened up. The change made Techno unreasonably nervous.

“Of course I have to kill him,” the Nagai said evenly. “Techno, I told you a long time ago that you had to kill him or I would. I still haven't lost the hope that once I kill him, you'll understand. Being a Sith isn't hard, Techno. It's way fucking easier than being a Jedi.”

Techno froze. *I told you a long time ago?*

“You *still* don't get it, Padawan? Gods, I'm disappointed. Here, I'll make it real simple: I'm still alive because of *you*. Now, I can teach you all the things that I couldn't the first time around.”

Ra-Lune's lightsaber hissed as it pressed against Phil's flesh. Techno's heart jumped into his throat, and he shot forward before he could even formulate a plan. But Ra-Lune threw out her free hand, and suddenly, a matching hand wrapped itself around Techno's throat like a vice. He gagged and stumbled to a stop.

“Techno,” Phil gasped. The other man's icy eyes clouded with pain as Ra-Lune drove her lightsaber deeper into his neck. “Techno, please, *help me*. I can't- I can't-”

Techno strained against Ra-Lune's hold with every ounce of strength he had. But he couldn't break her iron grip. He could only watch, choking on each breath, as Ra-Lune scorched away Phil's skin.

The Nagai suddenly glanced up. “This isn't enough,” she noted as if this whole situation was little more than a science experiment. “Alright. Let's make this very, very simple, then. Techno, since you refused to become my apprentice, Philza dies.”

Ra-Lune brought her lightsaber away from Phil's neck. Then, in one smooth movement, his former Master plunged the blade through Phil's chest.

“No!” Techno tried to scream. All that came out was a choked squeak.

Phil's eyes rolled back in his head. His Force presence grew dimmer and dimmer until finally, it faded away completely. Angry tears streamed down Techno's face, but he couldn't even raise a hand to wipe them away. Ra-Lune withdrew her lightsaber, and the blond man toppled forward in a dead man's slump. Phil hit the cobblestone with a sickening thud.

Agony grew in Techno's chest until it felt like he was burning alive, and he desperately reached for Phil's Force presence. It slipped through his fingers like sand.

“N-no,” Techno whispered. He was shivering, shaking with rage and panic and a chasm that threatened to drag him into despair. “Y-you're not real. He's still alive.”

Ra-Lune rolled her eyes. “Are we really going to have this conversation again?” the Nagai sighed. She plunged her lightsaber into Phil's lower back, then crossed her arms. “Alright. Let's recap,

Techno. You refused to let go of your shame and fear, which, you're welcome for, by the way. You were so stuck on me and what I'd done that my very essence clung to your misery. You kept me alive, and now, Philza is dead. I always, *always* told you that it would come down to this."

The invisible hand around Techno's throat tightened, and black spots began to dance in front of his eyes. How much longer could he hold on?

"Oh, right, that might be a little too tight. Sorry for the temporary discomfort, Padawan. After all... you need to be awake to see the show."

The hand loosened. Techno gasped for breath, and his head spun with dizzied relief. He still couldn't do much more than flop like a fish in Ra-Lune's grasp, but at least he could breathe again. And with the air, he could talk.

"What show?" Techno rasped.

Ra-Lune's face stretched in a wolfish grin. Slowly, the Nagai drew her lightsaber from Phil's back and crouched next to the Jedi Master's limp body. "He's down an arm now, right?" Ra-Lune muttered, seemingly to herself. "Let's start there."

The penny dropped several seconds too late. Techno opened his mouth to shout, but by then, Ra-Lune had already reactivated her lightsaber and began slicing through Phil's left arm. The smell of burning flesh filled Techno's nostrils, and he gagged, desperately trying to look away. Ra-Lune held him fast.

Finally, his former Master looked up with a triumphant grin. "Here we go!" she crowed. The Nagai held up a severed arm and waved it wildly. "Now for the other one, eh?"

Ra-Lune shifted over Phil's corpse and began slicing through his other arm. After that, she moved on to his legs. Techno watched it all dully. The smell was putrid, and the sight was disgusting on a level Techno had never known existed. But Ra-Lune wanted to break him. He knew that. Even if this was somehow real and Ra-Lune had managed to turn back time, Techno would never break for her.

After several horrific minutes, Ra-Lune's lightsaber suddenly powered off. Techno refocused and evenly met Ra-Lune's scrutinizing gaze.

"You're numb."

Techno smiled thinly. "Am I supposed to be doing something?"

Ra-Lune shrugged one shoulder. "I don't know. Screaming, maybe, or throwing up. Begging."

"Begging for what? My own life? I don't really care enough about it."

Something like a pleased smile spread over Ra-Lune's face, and she tipped her head to the side.

"You got more nihilistic over the years, Techno," the Nagai noted quietly, her eyes sparkling.

"That's good. Means I don't have to lay a finger on you. Well, not a physical finger."

The vice around Techno's neck suddenly tightened once again, and black spots flooded his vision. He choked and gasped, scrabbling at a hand that he couldn't touch. Techno reached for Ra-Lune, but she strode away, settling herself in the center of the courtyard with her lightsaber drawn.

"I'll be with you forever, Techno!" Ra-Lune bellowed, and her face split in a deranged grin. "We'll keep doing this until you're pleading with me to have mercy! Who do you want to start with, huh?"

How about your *first friend in this fucking Temple?*"

In a flash, Wilbur appeared at the edge of the courtyard. He charged at Ra-Lune with his amber lightsaber raised high. Just as quickly, Ra-Lune tore through Wilbur's chest with a crimson slash, and the man tumbled to the ground in a heap. A single tear slipped down Techno's cheek.

Ra-Lune whirled back around and spread her arms wide. "This is just the beginning, Techno!" she roared. Madness gleamed in her eyes, shining even brighter than her lightsaber. "Who's next?! Tommy or Tubbo? Dream? I'm stronger than all of them, Techno! And once everyone in this Temple is dead, we'll start all over. *This* is what you get for refusing my teaching! You can never escape me!"

Tommy and Tubbo appeared on opposite sides of the courtyard, and Ra-Lune carved through them with a maniacal cackle. The two boys dropped to the cobblestone with sizzling flesh and identical *Thumps*.

Someone else appeared next. Techno didn't bother to watch. He knew that he should be terrified at the prospect of an eternity spent in torment-

But he also knew that none of this was real.

Techno had been stuck in a cave before suddenly being whisked away to his past. Even though Ra-Lune insisted that she was real, Techno knew it was all in his head. Outside of his mind, every single one of the bodies that Ra-Lune had amassed was still alive. Techno could live with that.

*No one's dead*, he thought blearily. The hand around his throat felt like a metal strip digging into his Adam's apple. *No one is gonna die for except me. That's okay.*

Techno let his eyes slip shut. If he died before Ra-Lune could kill him, that would be better, right? Then he still wouldn't have given in to her. If he just-

A second lightsaber carved through the air.

Ra-Lune let out a piercing scream, and the hand around Techno's throat vanished. He collapsed with a groan, spikes of pain driving into his brain as his body brought itself back to life. For several seconds, Techno couldn't do anything more than gasp for air. What had just happened?

"*You.*"

The Nagai spat the single word with such hatred that it only furthered Techno's confusion. Ra-Lune had been in control throughout this vision. What had-

"I'm back, you bitch."

Phil?

It felt like moving through quicksand. But slowly, painfully, Techno dragged his head up. Phil and Ra-Lune faced off in the middle of the courtyard, staring at each other venomously. Ra-Lune clutched her right shoulder, which was now nothing more than a smoldering stump. Her right arm lay on the floor, smoking.

And Phil... Phil stood tall, piercing eyes narrowed at the Nagai. His face carried the scars of the present, and stubble lined his chin, but his left arm looked... normal. Where was his prosthetic? Was this just another trick of Techno's broken mind?

“How the fuck did you even get in here?!” Ra-Lune hissed, hunching like a cornered predator. “You should have died trying to enter his mind!”

A cold grin spread across Phil's face. “There's a lot you don't know about me,” the other man said lowly, and Techno almost smiled at the familiar tone. It was one that Phil only used while they were in the Underworld.

Ra-Lune stared for Phil for several seconds, and her dark eyes betrayed her confusion. Then a beaten scowl creased her face. “I get it now,” the Nagai muttered. “I feel Techno's power in you. Even with me haunting his mind, he still picked you, huh? I guess I should have known.” Ra-Lune drew her hand away from her shoulder and summoned her lightsaber to her remaining hand. “I don't care anymore,” Ra-Lune hissed. She finally looked up, and the raw fury on her face made Techno's skin crawl. “I don't care if he picked you. You're in my world, Philza. I'll kill you here and break Techno once and for all.”

The Force roared to life around Phil. Amongst the swirling forest green, tendrils of red snaked through like hidden knives.

“You won't kill me,” Phil chuckled. The sound was laced with hidden danger. “And you won't make it out of this fight.”

Ra-Lune attacked with a furious howl. Phil parried the blow, and within moments, the two were locked in a fierce battle. Techno had barely understood their exchange, and his brain had no better luck deciphering their movements. But he knew Phil's strategies like the back of his hand. His partner was a Master of Ataru, and already, Ra-Lune's tight swings were getting choppy and choppy as she tried to follow Phil's evasive dashes.

Finally, Ra-Lune snarled and whirled, lunging at Phil with her lightsaber lifted.

Phil moved faster than Techno could see. When his brain finally caught up, Phil's lightsaber was plunged through Ra-Lune's chest, and the Nagai stared at Phil with hate-filled eyes.

“You will never touch Techno again,” Phil whispered. Even though Techno's ears still rang from almost being choked to death, he heard Phil perfectly. “You hear me? Techno is free. You're dead, Ra-Lune. *Stay dead.*”

Phil ripped his lightsaber from Ra-Lune's chest. The Nagai gasped and stumbled. Slowly, Ra-Lune sank to the ground. Her eyes found Techno's, and for just a moment, she looked... afraid. Then her body dissolved into silver mist. A moment later, the corpses of Techno's dear friends did the same, and the courtyard became fuzzy at the edges. Phil was the only thing that didn't start to fade.

“Phil,” Techno rasped. “Are you really here? Or are you just...” Techno waved a helpless hand at the rapidly collapsing landscape. “Part of this?”

A warm smile spread across the blond man's face. Phil quickly crossed the courtyard and knelt. Before Techno could say anything, Phil pressed a finger to Techno's knuckles. With that single contact, their bond surged back to life. Techno inhaled slightly as Phil's Force presence settled back into his mind.

He felt whole again.

“I'm real,” Phil murmured. “I just didn't want to lead with that since I thought you wouldn't believe me.”

Techno nodded shakily. “I wouldn't have.”

Phil chuckled, and the other man's fond gaze filled Techno with a strength he hadn't known in days. Had it been days? He still didn't know.

"Listen, Techno," Phil murmured. Sadness dampened the blond man's smile. "This is all in your head. Your body is lying in a cave in the Underworld, and the Dark Side of the Force is literally killing you. But I can drag you out of here. It's going to hurt like a son of a bitch, but-"

Techno didn't even need to hear the rest. He grabbed Phil's hand and squeezed it once. "Get me the hell out of here," he muttered. "Do whatever you have to. I don't want to be here anymore."

Phil laughed, loud and strong. Then everything dissolved into a white haze.

Techno had no doubt that the transition from mental nightmare to reality should have been as painful as Phil had warned it would be. But his exhausted mind couldn't fully grasp the pain, and in the end, Techno just felt like he was being tickled.

Finally, feeling spread through his limbs. With the return of his senses, the pain that his brain hadn't processed arrived in full force, and Techno groaned as a throbbing headache assaulted his battered mind.

"There you are."

Techno blinked a couple of times. He was... laying down. A strip of lights glared down at him from the ceiling, and Phil stood over him with a gentle smile.

"Where are we?" Techno tried to ask. A cough took the place of his question, and he hacked out the dust that coating his throat. Luckily, Phil seemed to understand the gist of his incoherent noises.

"We're heading back up the surface," Phil murmured. "And don't worry about Dream; he's in the other room. You made it, Techno."

Those two sentences brought Techno more peace of mind than he'd ever felt before. He let out a relieved sigh and closed his eyes once more. *Okay*, he whispered through their bond. *I'm going back to sleep until we get to the Temple.*

Phil's only response was fond understanding. Techno smiled.

He and Dream had survived.

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Clay ran a finger along his cheek. His reflection did the same, and Clay smiled wanly at how ghastly he looked. His scars made him look terrible at any given time, but with the added effects of sunken eyes and pale skin, he looked like a ghost. *I almost was*, Clay thought absently. He was all too aware of how close to death he'd strayed.

No time to think about that. Clay would consider his mortality at a later date, hopefully during a peaceful meditation session. Gods, meditation had never sounded so amazing.

Clay finally stopped picking at his scars, and he scowled at the mirror. Well, he was still ragged and worn. But it was the best he would get. Clay sighed heavily and slipped into the tan robes that had been left out for him (his usual robes had been filthy from his and Techno's trek). He checked his reflection one more time, then limped into the hallway.



The ship was quiet. Clay had woken up almost half an hour ago, and since then, the loudest noise he'd heard was the ship's thrusters adjusting. Out of respect for everyone, Clay tried to walk as silently as he could. As he shuffled past the infirmary, he glanced inside.

All four Sleepy Boys crowded inside. Techno lay on the cot, fast asleep, and Philza, Wilbur, and Tommy sat around in the bed in various makeshift chairs.

*They look exhausted,* Clay thought worriedly. *They've probably been sitting here all night.*

Clay looked around. A pack of energy bars was tucked on a nearby shelf, so he plucked one from the case and turned back to the infirmary. *Wilbur*, he whispered. *Over here.* The other man looked up. Wilbur's dark bags were even worse than Clay's, and it took all of Clay's self-control to keep from wincing.

*What?* Wilbur asked. He sounded as tired as he looked.

*Catch.*

Clay tossed the energy bar, and Wilbur quickly caught it. Tommy flinched wildly at the sudden movement, but Wilbur patted his padawan's shoulder and shot Clay a tired smile.

*Thanks. I'll try to get Philza to eat.*

*I'd appreciate that. He looks terrible.*

*Yeah, well... we all do.*

Clay couldn't argue with that. He inclined his head slightly, then continued down the hallway with Wilbur's quiet "Hey, Phil..." trailing in the air behind him. After a couple of painful steps, Clay slipped into the main cabin. It was also silent, save for the beeps and whirrs of the ship-

And a slim figure sitting in the captain's chair, flicking a lever back and forth.

"You aren't changing our course, are you?" Clay asked lightly. "I really wanna go home." The figure huffed a laugh, and Clay smiled at the sound, crossing the room as quickly as his bad ankle allowed. He lowered himself into the co-captain's chair, then murmured, "What are you doing? You should be resting."

George looked up at him, and Clay's heart did small loop-de-loops at the shorter man's fond smile. "Don't worry, I've had quite enough of the Underworld for a while," George said breezily. "I'm just talking to the kid."

Clay glanced out the windshield, just in case he'd somehow missed a kid clinging to the nose of the ship. He hadn't. "A kid?" he echoed hesitantly.

"Mhm." George flicked the lever on and off again, and across the way, another ship flashed their headlights in return. "He's been rising with us for the past 50 levels."

"And how are you talking to him?" Clay prompted.

George flicked the lever again, then chuckled. "Morse code," the engineer explained, once his mirth had died down. "Every Underworld parent teaches their kid Morse code. If something bad happens, like their home is raided or pirates take over their ship, the kid can nonverbally tell their parent what's going on. But it's gotten really popular, which makes it kind of pointless."

Clay shook his head slightly. "The Underworld confuses me."

"You're telling me. I had to learn everything about Morse code in less than two weeks. No one would hire me if I didn't know it."

Clay was treated to the sudden mental image of George pouring over a projection of the entire Morse alphabet, and he grinned faintly. But his amusement was tinged with sadness. George had had a rough time adjusting to the Underworld. Clay didn't need to hear George's war stories and anecdotes to know that.

The two of them sat in silence for a long time. George continued his conversation with the kid across the shaft, and Clay was content to watch. It also provided him the chance to give the shorter man a once-over.

George's face was a shade paler than usual, probably from all the strain of the past two days. The engineer's chocolate eyes drifted between the lever and the other ship, and they glittered in the faint light of the overhead strips. The only thing that ruined George's ethereal image was his hair. It stuck up in a few places, and Clay had to fight back to the urge to smooth it down.

*Then again, he reasoned, surely George won't mind. After all... we're friends.*

Clay leaned forward and carefully smoothed George's hair down. The shorter man leaned into his touch. Clay's heart flopped like a fish out of water.

"Alright, he and his moms are going home," George announced eventually. Right on cue, the ship across the way ducked into a small port and disappeared from view. The engineer sat back in his chair and swiveled to face Clay. "You're one to talk about resting," he noted. "I thought you'd sleep the whole way back. You're early by almost three hours."

Clay shrugged slightly. "I woke up," he said simply. "And... I wanted to talk to you."

George's brow creased. "Something wrong?"

Clay hesitated. He'd planned out a whole speech in his head, but now that he had George's undivided attention, he was strangely nervous. And... he felt so unprotected without his mask. George had seen his face before, of course, but only for a few minutes at a time. Clay couldn't hide behind it anymore.

Eventually, Clay realized that he'd been quiet for too long, and he cleared his throat. "No, no, everything's fine," he assured, then winced at how awkward he sounded. "Everything's more than fine, actually, since you saved me." Clay chuckled nervously, and though George smiled back at him, the engineer didn't lose his worried frown. "Listen, uh... I never thanked you."

"Didn't have to."

And gods, wasn't that a perfect way for Clay to end the conversation? He could take the easy out George was offering and move on to pleasant subjects. But that wasn't fair. Clay had spent four years regretting everything he'd never told George, and that wouldn't happen again. Not when he'd been handed another chance.

"I still want to thank you," Clay pressed. "And it's not just that. You realize what you did, right?"

A small smile touched the engineer's face. "Yeah. Dragged your unconscious ass back to this ship."

Clay suddenly questioned why he'd wanted to have a deep, serious conversation, and he rolled his eyes. "Fucking stop," he grumbled. "You did a hell of a lot more than that. George, you literally went down to the center of Coruscant and rescued Techno and me from Force Hell. That's a big deal."

"A vergence," George corrected absently.

Clay blinked. "What?"

"A vergence. Wilbur and I figured it out on the way down here. It's a place where either the Light Side or the Dark Side gathers and makes life really fucking difficult for the other side. You and Techno were stuck in a Dark Side vergence."

"Okay."

Clay didn't understand what on earth George was talking about. Again, an easy out would be to ask what a vergence was and how no one had noticed a vergence *buried at Coruscant's core*. But that wasn't the point, either.

Clay took a deep breath. Then he reached out and carefully laid his hands over George's. Clay examined the shorter man's face for any signs of discomfort. He found none. George just watched him with mild curiosity, and... a glimmer of something that Clay couldn't decipher.

"You didn't have to come down here," Clay murmured, gently squeezing George's hands. "But you did. You risked your fucking life for me, George, and I can't even tell you how much that means to me. Hell, you could have left this to Philza and Wilbur and Tommy. So... thank you. I don't... I don't think I can ever tell you that enough or even comprehend that you literally went *into* the Dark Side for me."

Clay's cheeks burned from his little speech, and his hands itched at the contact. But he didn't have a mask to hide behind, and he refused to move his hands. This was the first step towards him opening up.

Finally, George let out a soft chuckle that melted Clay's insides. "Of course I'd come to save you," the shorter man murmured. His eyes drifted across Clay's hands, and Clay could just about hear the questions George was holding back. "You're my best friend, Clay. You're worth risking my life for."

The power of speech completely abandoned him. Clay swallowed once, twice, then tried to clear out the emotions that had suddenly flooded his chest. *Best friend?* he wondered. With that thought came, *I'm not worth it, George*.

But he wouldn't question it. He couldn't lose his fragile hope that maybe, just maybe, he and George had a chance at redemption.

And here came the hard part.

Clay gently untangled his hands from George's. "Anyways," he mumbled. "I saw you staring. Give me a minute."

The bandages that wrapped around his hands had basically taken the place of his skin. For years, that was all Clay had seen, and he barely remembered what his arms looked like. But that was in the past. No more hiding.

"Give you a second to do what?" George asked, his tone notably suspicious. George ignored the

shorter man and began unwrapping his right hand. "Clay, wait, what the fuck are you doing? I *was* staring, but I didn't mean-"

"Stop," Clay chided, batting away George's reaching hands. "I want to do this."

That was half true. Clay's hands trembled as he unwrapped the bandages, but his frustration at his own cowardice overpowered his fear. He'd hidden for years now, and it had never gotten him anywhere. It had only made him more and more afraid.

Besides... after his experience in the cave, Clay felt physically ill at the thought of bowing to the Council. Or, rather, bowing to what they represented. He wanted to make amends with George, didn't he? To do that, he had to face himself.

No matter how much it scared him.

It took several minutes for Clay to undo all of his bandages. Each finger was individually wrapped, and some strips had been woven between others to keep everything in place. But with each strip that fell from his hands, Clay's soul felt lighter. Finally, he tugged the last bandages away from his wrists. His arms were individually wrapped, so those remained covered. But Clay's hands were completely exposed.

George stared.

Clay should have been uncomfortable. But all he felt was mild happiness at the chance to look over his best friend. George really did look exhausted. But up close, Clay could clearly see the scars that curved down George's neck and disappeared into his shirt. Up close, Clay could see the freckles that dusted the shorter man's cheeks.

"Is your whole body like this?" George murmured.

Clay flinched, startled out of his examination. Fuck, why had he drifted off like that? It wasn't the time. And, as he'd been telling himself since George's return, *there would never be a fucking time*.

"Uh, not exactly," Clay mumbled aloud. "My hands are the worst. There's some on my shoulders and my back, too. A couple across my chest. I, uh... I think there's some on my legs, maybe. But my hands and arms were the most obvious, so I wrapped them up. Stopped the questions."

George nodded wordlessly. After a few more moments of silence, the engineer reached out a hesitant hand. "Can I feel them?" the shorter man asked quietly.

Clay held his hands out with what he hoped was an inviting smile. "Be my guest."

George's fingers settled against Clay's hands, and a shock of electricity jittered through his body. It took every ounce of strength Clay had to keep from snatching his hands back and wrapping them up once again. But no, he'd promised himself that he'd do this. He *wouldn't* hide.

Even though nausea pooled in his stomach from the physical contact. Even though Clay hated his hands.

His hands were worse than his face, in his opinion. Clay could live with his face, even if it was shameful. But his hands were... ugly. Both were damaged beyond repair, with clusters of scars tracing up each finger and crude lines cutting across his palms to preserve his nerves. The only clean patch of skin was the back of his left hand – where he'd been held still.

George brushed a gentle finger over Clay's knuckles, and Clay instinctively clenched his fists.

“Sorry,” he mumbled. He tried to unclench his fists, but they refused to obey. “It, uh... it's kind of a habit.”

“Don't worry,” George chuckled. The shorter man shot him a soft smile that made Clay feel a little dizzy. “I already told you, Clay. I know that scars aren't an easy topic. Can I ask what happened?”

*“You're just a fucking kid. What are you doing down here, trying to be tough?”*

*“You dare to disrespect the Hound? I'll break your fucking fingers one by one!”*

*“Oh... you're in luck, kid. We got a special shipment today. How do you feel about acid treatment?”*

Phantom pain shot up Clay's fingers. For a moment, all he could feel was the sizzling of his own flesh and the smell that had haunted him for weeks.

Breathe. He could do this.

“It's a long story.” Clay took another deep breath, then rushed into his explanation. “Short version, I picked a fight with the wrong mob boss. I was 18, and I'd decided that Master Tengal couldn't keep me from going into the world, and... fucking, I don't know. Changing it, I guess. But... clearly, that didn't work out. The mob wanted to teach me a lesson, so I got my hands dunked in a barrel of acid. Once I finally limped back to the Temple, my skin was too damaged to be completely repaired, and the doctors suggested amputation. But I wanted my hands. So they patched me up as best they could.”

Clay ran out of breath in a huff, and he silently prayed that George didn't ask any questions.

But George kept to his word and didn't pry. “That's pretty good cosmetic work for acid,” the engineer admitted with the barest hint of a smile. “I've seen some people who looked like fucking demons. The Temple's got some damn good doctors.”

“Yeah, well...” Clay tried to smile, though he wasn't sure if it worked or not. “They recolored Eret's eyes, too. I guess the Council hired the best of the best.”

They both chuckled. Silence hung over the cabin as George continued his wordless examination and Clay worked on unclenching his fists. Finally, the engineer's dark eyes flicked up to meet his. A shudder ran down Clay's spine.

“Can I ask about any of these?” George asked. The shorter man lifted a hand and gently ran a finger along Clay's jaw. “I am pretty curious.”

The feather-light touch sent more shudders rippling across his body. Clay closed his eyes for a moment, but when he refocused on George, he felt no less unsteady. “You first,” Clay suggested. He lifted silent thanks to the gods that his voice didn't shake. “We'll take turns. Tell the big stories whenever we work up the courage to.”

George's face lit up. “I'm game. You see this scar on my finger?” The engineer held up his right hand, and Clay squinted at the thin line running down George's index finger. “Got this from a saw that I bought. I was a fucking idiot who didn't read the instructions first, and I almost chopped my fingers off. It's a miracle that I didn't lose my whole hand, honestly.”

“Bullshit,” Clay muttered, though he had to admit that the scar looked pretty deep. “Alright, well, I almost accidentally cut my leg off with my lightsaber.”

“You're absolutely making that one up.”

For the next three hours, Clay slowly disassembled the walls that he'd layered against his skin. It was a brick-by-brick process, and some stories Clay refused to recall, even in the name of honesty. But George's gentle touch against his hands and face didn't make him want to throw up. Clay remembered what it felt like to have someone see his scars and not find him deformed or guilty.

And... Clay learned about George's scars, too. The cluster that ran across George's neck and left collarbone had been made by a brutal shock from the staff that became his own. Following that encounter, George had vowed never to use his staff over power 8. Many of the scars that decorated George's knuckles had come from learning how to use Underworld machinery. And one scar that ran across the back of George's neck had come from a feral cat. That story had made Clay burst out laughing.

They laughed a lot as they talked. Clay took in the shine of George's eyes and the shorter man's bright laugh and felt himself come back to life. Gods, he'd missed this. Four years, his heart had *yearned* for this.

He still couldn't quite believe that he'd gotten a second chance.

Eventually, their mirth was interrupted by a beep from the ship's controls.

George immediately snapped to attention at the sound, and for a second, Clay panicked. "What is it?" he demanded. "Don't tell me that something *else* is going wrong."

"No, no, everything's fine," George assured him hurriedly. The engineer swiveled towards the controls and scanned the panels with a professional's keen eye. "We're just... we're almost back at the Temple, Clay. Five minutes out."

Clay's throat closed up. Oh, shit, he'd forgotten about this part. There would undoubtedly be a welcome party waiting for them, and Clay was in no shape for a public appearance. He didn't have a mask, and he'd unwrapped his hands. Hell, Clay was wearing standard fucking Jedi robes! What was he going to do? Sneak out the back of the ship?

After a few moments of panic, the absurdity of the situation dawned on him. *Am I scared of being judged?* Clay demanded of himself. If he was honest, the answer was yes. *Since when do I give a shit about what the rest of the Order thinks? I fucked up, and that's okay. I will be okay.*

"Almost there," George announced. "I think there's already a party waiting for us. Alright, I'm going to get the Sleepy Boys." The engineer stood, then hesitated, his hands hovering worriedly above Clay's. "Clay, uh... are you okay with being the first one out there?"

Concern flowed from George like water, and Clay belatedly realized that he hadn't taken asked about George's unusually bright Force presence the whole time they'd been talking. No matter. Clay could use that topic as an excuse to have another deep conversation. For the moment, he just chuckled and gently took George's hands in his own.

"Don't worry about me," Clay said fondly. "I'll be fine. Go get the Sleepy Boys."

George's frown melted away, and the engineer gently squeezed Clay's hands before hurrying into the back of the ship. As soon as the shorter man had disappeared, Clay inhaled deeply. It was time to stand by his word and stop living afraid. He was human. There was no shame in that.

The Temple grew larger and larger in the windshield. Clay scanned the crowd and was met by jumping younglings, waving padawans, and a few smiling Jedi. Clay assumed that most of the excitement was meant for Philza and Wilbur (both of whom were extremely popular among the

younger members of the Order). Finally, the ship landed on the tarmac with a low rumble.

Clay heaved himself to his feet and wandered over to the unopened hatch. *Ready?* he asked himself bemusedly.

*No.*

*Great.*

Clay pressed the open button, then buried his hands in his sleeves to keep himself from chickening out. The second the door peeled back, blinding sunlight and an unintelligible roar assaulted his senses. It took several seconds before Clay's brain could process the pandemonium. Then it struck him.

The Jedi surrounding the ship were cheering.

Clay glanced over his shoulder to see if Philza or Wilbur had shown up. No. It was just him, standing alone. The people cheered for him.

“Welcome back, Dream!” someone shouted from nearby.

“We're glad you're safe!” another called.

The cheers sounded like a different language. These Jedi had probably never seen Clay's face before. Why... why did none of them care? More than yet, why were they so excited to see *him*?

*Maybe they don't care about your mistakes as much as you think they do.*

The little voice spoke in a whisper, but the words hit Clay harder than a boulder. Was this what it felt like to have peers? Friends? Was this how it felt to have an Order that supported him through thick and thin?

Maybe it was.

Clay swallowed back his nerves and ignored the emotions that threatened to clog his throat. He plastered on a smile that didn't feel as fake as he'd expected, then descended into the crowd. Immediately, Clay was engulfed by back-patting and more cheers and brilliant grins. Clay accepted all of it with dazed appreciation. The other Jedi were genuinely relieved that he'd made it back safely. Maybe... maybe he'd have to start learning names. The other Jedi weren't as scary as he remembered.

“Dream!”

The voice cut through the cheers like a hot knife. Clay straightened and looked around wildly. At first, he saw nothing. Then a mop of black hair appeared at the bottom of the Temple steps, and joy exploded in Clay's heart. He rushed the rest of the way through the crowd with hurried apologies. Finally, he burst through and stumbled to a stop.

Nick sat on the bottom step, hands clasped and a mischievous grin decorating his face. “Hey, Clay,” the younger man said brightly. “I would have called you that in the first place, but it's your hidden name, so I decided not to.”

For a moment, Clay was tempted to just throw himself at his best friend and hope to be caught. Then he noticed the bacta patch covering Nick's right eye, and panic replaced his joy in a rush. “What happened?” Clay demanded. “Did someone hurt you?”

“Yeah,” Nick said, far too nonchalantly. The younger man stood, lifting his arms over his head in a leisurely stretch. “Turns out, Delphina's a fucking traitor who hates kids, and she decided that I didn't really need both eyes.”

If Clay had two hours and his holopad, he still wouldn't be able to figure out that sentence. “What?” he asked, utterly lost.

Nick's smug smile morphed into a goofy, lopsided grin. “It doesn't matter right now, you idiot,” he said softly. “Give me a fucking hug.”

That was all the invitation he needed. Clay surged forward and engulfed Nick in a bear hug, burying his face in the younger man's shoulder. Nick did the same, and the pure relief and love that emanated off of his dear friend made Clay's heart sing.

*I was so, so worried about you. I didn't- I didn't know if you would make it back. I didn't even know if you were fucking alive until Philza messaged us last night.*

Clay pulled Nick closer, resting his nose in his best friend's wavy hair. *I know. I'm sorry.*

*It wasn't your fault. I'm just really, really, really fucking glad that you're home.*

For a long moment, the two of them just stood there, wrapped together. Nick's radiant Force presence warmed the last corners of Clay's exhausted mind, and in Nick's arms, Clay finally slumped. He was really home. He'd made it out alive.

Finally, Nick drew back and gave Clay a watery smile. “And you're still in one piece,” the younger man said, coughing a laugh. “I'm impressed. Are you okay without a mask?”

Clay smiled back. “I'm fine,” he chuckled. “It was about time I stopped hiding behind it. I might need some new bandages, though.”

Clay held up his hands for Nick's examination, and the younger man's eyes bulged from his head.

“Holy fucking Kantos,” Nick muttered. He grabbed Clay's hands for a closer look, which, strangely, Clay found that he didn't mind. Only later would he realize it was because Nick was the only person who had never hurt him. “Clay, is- you've been hiding *these* since you were 18?”

Clay blinked, startled by the accuracy. “Yes,” he said slowly. “How'd you know that?”

Nick snorted derisively. “I know when my best friend started wearing fucking bandages all the time. So-”

“I'll tell you later,” Clay interrupted gently. “I promise.” Nick rolled his eyes with a dramatic huff but thankfully complained no further. “I didn't see Bad anywhere. Are they-”

*“Dream!”*

Clay's head whipped around at the voice. Nick's grin returned in full force, and the younger man pushed Clay towards the steps. A whirlwind of brown hair and green robes burst out of the Temple, and the world slowed to a standstill.

Tubbo was hurtling down the steps. Unlike Nick, the brown-haired boy seemed to be completely unharmed, and gods, Clay couldn't stop a relieved smile from stretching across his face.

“Tubbo!” Clay shouted, opening his arms wide. Tubbo launched off the steps with a delighted



laugh, and Clay caught his padawan, spinning them both a few times before planting Tubbo's feet back on the ground.

Tubbo's Force presence bloomed in Clay's mind, reopening their bond (Clay hadn't even noticed that Tubbo had closed himself off) and sending endorphins pinging around Clay's mind. He clung to Tubbo like his padawan was going to fly away. Judging by Tubbo's iron grip on the back of his robes, the brown-haired boy was having the same thoughts.

"You're back," Tubbo croaked. His padawan's shoulder began to shake, and a landslide of emotions cascaded across their bond. "You're *alive*."

Tears pricked at Clay's eyes. He instinctively raised a hand to wipe them away, but as soon as he let go of Tubbo's robes, his padawan shuddered. Clay immediately decided against it. He resettled his hand, rested his chin on the top of Tubbo's head, and let his eyes close.

Tubbo's heartbeat pounded through their bond. Though the sound exacerbated the headache Clay had had since he'd woken up, it also made his entire being sigh with relief. Tubbo was alive. Clearly, some shit had gone down, but Nick was okay, too.

Even he and Techno had made it out alive.

Clay opened his eyes and gently nudged Tubbo out of their tight embrace. "I'm so sorry," he murmured once Tubbo had reluctantly shuffled a step away. "I am so fucking sorry. I failed you, Tubbo, but I promise that it'll never happen again."

Tubbo's eyes shone with unshed tears, but the brown-haired boy's mouth tipped in an uneven smile. "It's okay," Tubbo whispered. "It's not your fault. It... it's enough that you survived. You didn't fail."

*I almost didn't make it, Clay thought. And I definitely wouldn't have if Techno hadn't been there.* But Tubbo didn't need to know that, so Clay just dragged his padawan into another hug.

"I'm still mad at you, though," Tubbo mumbled after a few moments of silence. "I got a communicator from Eret to talk to Tommy and them, but they were so busy saving you that I barely got to talk to him. There was a lot of shit that went down, you know. The Eastern Wing almost got blown up."

That broke through Clay's haze of peace like a hammer. He pulled back and stared down at Tubbo. "What?" he demanded. "What the fuck happened?"

"Ehhh, doesn't matter. I'll tell you later."

Tubbo seemed determined to keep his face buried in Clay's shoulder, so Clay reluctantly shelved his questions. He glanced over at Nick, who was watching the two of them fondly. Now that Clay was really looking, he could see the lines of exhaustion ringing Nick's eyes.

Clay held out an arm to his best friend. "Come on," he prompted at Nick's confused look. "Group hug."

"No thanks," Nick muttered, but a smile touched his face. "Besides, Georgie's on his way over here."

Clay frowned. "So? All four of us will group hug."

"I don't want a group hug," Tubbo pitched in. The brown-haired boy's voice was still muffled by

Clay's shoulder, and Clay rolled his eyes, fondly ruffling his padawan's hair. "This isn't an endearing thing, Master. I don't want a group hug."

"Too bad," Clay chided. "You're getting one, if Nick *would just get his ass over here.*"

Nick sighed dramatically and sauntered over to the two of them. "Alright, alright," the younger man groaned. "If you insist. Gods. I expect lunch as payment or something. I don't do touchy-feely stuff."

As soon as Clay wrapped an arm around Nick's shoulder, the younger man melted into him.

*Yeah, you absolutely hate physical contact,* Clay thought dryly. *I can tell.*

*Shut the fuck up and hug me.*

The three of them stood together for a long moment. Then an ocean blue Force presence hesitantly pressed against Clay's shields. He glanced over his shoulder, confused. George hovered a few meters away, watching them with something Clay would almost call melancholy.

*Get over here,* Clay ordered. *You're part of this, too.*

Slowly, George wandered closer. To Clay's relief, Nick grabbed George by the shoulders and dragged the engineer into their group hug. Nick and George stared at each other for a moment. Then they collapsed against each other with matching embarrassed laughs. Clay filed the interaction away to be questioned at a later date, but for the moment, he simply held Tubbo and Nick and rested his head against George's.

All four of them had survived. Somehow, against all the odds, they'd made it.

Clay had almost died in the cave. Had it not been for the rescue party, he would have succumbed to the darkness.

*I would have never seen Nick or Tubbo again,* Clay realized suddenly. *Or George. Or anyone.*

Sobs wracked Clay's body before he even processed that he was crying. For once, he didn't try to control himself. Clay just pressed his face into George's shoulder and let everything that had built up for four years come pouring out. Tubbo and Nick both hugged him tighter. It only made Clay cry harder.

"We're here, Master," Tubbo whispered. The brown-haired boy's hands clung on the back of Clay's robes. It was the only thing that grounded Clay. "We're here. You're not alone."

---

Wilbur and Tommy left the ship without a second look back. Phil smiled at their enthusiasm to see people again (and no doubt, Tommy wanted to see Tubbo). But as soon as they made it down the ramp, Phil closed the hatch and lifted off the tarmac. A couple of Jedi waved for him to come back. Phil ignored him and drove the ship back into Coruscant traffic. It was almost funny. This was his first time piloting with his prosthetic, but it felt like nothing had changed.

Phil glanced down at his fake arm. George had done a marvelous job of making the plating look natural. If needles of phantom pain didn't drive into Phil's shoulder every so often, he'd almost believe that his arm was real.

Almost.

Techno's Force presence suddenly emerged from the hallway. Phil offered a cheerful hum through their bond, and Techno returned it, though the pig Jedi was clearly exhausted. A moment later, weight pressed against the back of the captain's chair.

"Where are we going?" Techno asked. The ragged quality of his partner's voice made Phil wince, but he didn't comment on it.

"Temple hangar," Phil said, carefully steering them around two erratic speeders. "We've been through enough shit in the past two days. I'm not going to stand through an entire welcome party."

"You like welcome parties."

Most of the time, Phil did. He liked seeing the smiling faces of all his fellow Jedi. But there was an ache in his bones that he just couldn't shake, and the thought of dealing with the rest of the Council was horrific. Phil was more than happy to ditch the Order for the moment.

And Techno raised no objections as they flew.

They were silent as Phil piloted the ship into the hangar and landed in its designated spot. Phil stood from the captain's chair, but his entire body screamed in protest, and he winced slightly. Techno held out a hand. Phil slapped it away.

"I'm not an old man, Techno," Phil muttered, shooting his partner a tired grin. "I can walk by myself."

A matching grin touched Techno's face. "You're kind of an old man," the pig Jedi corrected archly. "And forget about your legs. *I'm* the one that was stuck down in level 2 for a full day. More than that, actually. I think I deserve some assistance."

Though Techno was making light of his injuries as he always did, genuine exhaustion colored the pig Jedi's cheeks. So, once the two of them had gathered up their bags and limped out of the ship, Phil slung his arm under Techno's shoulders. The pig Jedi leaned on him wordlessly. It pained Phil to see Techno in such bad shape, but he also smiled a little at how much his partner trusted him.

Phil was determined never to break that trust.

Both Jedi stationed at the hangar's entrance saluted stiffly as Phil and Techno left. A coil of unease swirled around Phil's stomach at the gesture, but he nodded curtly to both of them and hurried past. Once he and Techno made it into the hallway, he muttered, "The day I see another Jedi salute to me will be when I'm dead. Maybe not even then."

"It's too government," Techno muttered back. The pig Jedi's face screwed into a frown. "That wasn't a real sentence. Gods, I'm... I'm so tired, Phil."

Phil tightened his grip on Techno's tunic. "I know," he murmured. "I'm getting you back to your room as quickly as I can."

"Thanks."

Techno's Force presence ebbed and flowed like waves lapping on a beach. The pig Jedi was almost consumed by exhaustion. Phil set his jaw and walked a little faster, weaving them between meandering Jedi and ignoring the triumphant calls that followed them. He could be polite on a day when Techno wasn't in pain.

It was a painful process. Phil's body hurt like a son of a bitch, and Techno was more or less dead

weight. But finally, they made it across the Temple. Phil heaved a sigh of relief as they rounded a corner and found Techno's door waiting for them.

*Thank the gods,* he thought wearily. *I don't think I could have carried him much further.*

Phil waved one finger, calling on the Force to unlock the door. Just as Phil was about to hobble them inside, Techno pushed himself upright.

"I'm fine," the pig Jedi muttered sharply. "I can walk by myself."

Phil frowned at the sudden change. But he relinquished Techno without a word, watching silently as his partner stumbled into the room. For a moment, Techno just stood there, frozen. Then the pig Jedi collapsed to his knees.

Anguish rolled off of Techno in jagged waves, and Phil's heart constricted. "Oh, Techno," he murmured. Phil closed the door behind him, then slung his bag off of his shoulder. He knelt next to Techno and wrapped his arms around the pig Jedi's shoulders, burying his face in Techno's hair.

"Why?" Techno croaked. The pig Jedi was well and truly shaking now, tears streaming down his face. The agony that poured through their bond was devastating. "Why do we have to deal with all of this? It's always you or me or Dream or someone else who doesn't deserve it! Why do we always get the worst that the world has to offer?!"

Phil just shook his head slightly, and Techno grabbed Phil's wrists with shaking hands. Phil couldn't feel his partner's touch on his left wrist.

Something in Phil's soul broke.

In a rush, all of his strength abandoned him, and all Phil could do was cradle his sobbing partner to his chest. "I don't know," Phil whispered. He buried his face in Techno's hair once again. "I don't know why the gods hate us."

Techno shuddered, so Phil shifted until they were both leaning against one of the couches, Techno half-curved against his right side. Phil rested his forehead against Techno's and closed his eyes. The pig Jedi's tears stained his shoulder.

*This isn't fair,* Phil thought, and tears pricked at his eyes. *Why is it always us? Why can't it be someone else?* A fresh wave of anguish swept through their bond, and Phil clutched Techno tighter, trying to swallow back his own tears. *Just for once, let us rest. Haven't we done enough?*

Techno, forced to kill his own Master.

Phil, fighting with the Council since the moment of his joining.

Both of them, being beaten an inch from their lives on their missions, all the sake of "authenticity."

Both of them, getting the short end of the stick, day in and day out.

"We'll make it," Phil whispered. His voice broke on every single word, but he couldn't find the strength to fight back the pain that threatened to bury him alive. "I promise, Techno, we'll make it."

"You can't promise that. I almost died to the Dark Side of the Force, Phil."

A memory flashed through Phil's mind. When he had posed the idea of him and Techno becoming partners, directly after Techno's fight with Ra-Lune, Techno had looked up at him and said, *"I'd*

*like that, but I'm pretty sure I'm going to be exiled for killing Ra-Lune. She was going to kill you, though, so... it was worth it."*

He should have known then that they were doomed to suffer.

"You're right," Phil choked out. His body shook beyond his control, and he swallowed back a broken sob. "I can't promise anything."

Words abandoned him, so Phil just squeezed his eyes shut and reached for Techno through their bond. The pig Jedi clung to him just as desperately. Time blended together as the two of them huddled together, all the pain they'd been forced to endure swirling around them like they were the eye of a storm.

*This isn't fair,* Techno sobbed. *None of it's fair.*

*I know,* Phil whispered back. *I know.*

## Chapter End Notes

What? No, no, I'm not crying. I was... just...

Yeah, I cried while writing this chapter. Several times, in fact. While it hurt me to compose this (and probably hurt y'all to read it), this is, without a doubt, one of my favorite chapters. And I hope y'all enjoyed it! If you feel so inclined, please leave a comment and let me know what you thought! I always, always love hearing y'all's feedback <3

Before my closing message, I have a bit of a special announcement! Last week, this story reached 20k hits! That number is absolutely unreal, and I genuinely cannot thank y'all enough. You are the best readers that I had never even dreamed of asking for ♥

Now, for my posting schedule! As per usual, I'm taking a two-week break to get prepared for the next arc. (I still won't tell y'all how many arcs are left, but... I will say that we're heading towards the end.)

As always, I appreciate every single one of you that read this story. Whether you've been here for a while or just discovered this, you mean the world to me. Take care of yourselves, my dear readers, and I'll see you again on March 12!

# Bleeding Judas, Part 1

## Chapter Notes

Hello, everyone! This story has officially returned from its prolonged hiatus, and god, I am thrilled to be back! Let me just tell you... this arc is going to be a banger. The extra time taken to prepare was well worth it! I hope you enjoy reading this as much as I did writing it! (Seriously, this chapter was... this chapter was such a wild ride.)

Trigger warning for an on-screen death. Always take care of yourselves while reading!

Welcome, dear readers, to Bleeding Judas!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Nick didn't like being in crowds. They constricted his line of sight, cut off any escape routes, made him feel trapped inside his own skin. Even in a courtyard of his fellow Jedi, Nick just wanted to *get out*. It didn't help that he was still down an eye.

Nick lifted a hand and gingerly felt the bacta patch that covered the right side of his face. Technically, his eye was fine. He'd been lucky enough to avoid most Delphina's scything blow, with the lightsaber only cutting through his eyelid and the skin above and below it. So, while Nick would carry a horrible scar for the rest of his life, his eye would survive.

Another ugly mark.

Scars were a natural by-product of living an adventurous life, and Nick had long since resigned himself to the face that he'd never have a pretty face. Sure, he was handsome as shit, but there was only so much that bacta could do for his scars. It wasn't like the other Jedi in the Order looked any better.

Someone with prosthetic hands wandered past. Two Jedi with deep scars across their cheeks talked animatedly next to a fountain. And for just a moment, the crowd parted to reveal Eret across the way. His silver eyes glinted in the sunlight.

Nick picked at the scars that slit both of his cheeks, grimacing at their waxy texture. He was just another one of the scarred, huh?

It was kind of nice, knowing that he was just like everyone else.

“Sapnap! There you are!”

The cheerful shout broke Nick from his gloomy thoughts, and he looked up. Rhodys strode towards him, their mouth split in a wide grin and their bright yellow eyes gleaming.

“Hey, Rhodys,” Nick called back. He tried for a smile, and to his surprise, found that it came naturally. Rhodys extended a hand, and Nick shook it warmly. “I promised I'd be here, didn't I? But damn, there's a lot of people out here to support you. Looks like you're popular.”

Rhodys shook their head with a self-deprecating smile. “They're not all here for me,” they said, clearly amused by the supposed attention. “Most of them haven't even noticed I'm here. They're all

talking to Cho-Nal or Mazenos or Jahra. But it's nice to know that everyone cares so much about who's elected to the Council.”

Nick bit back a wan smile. “Of course, they care,” he said mildly. The thoughts roiling in his mind were anything but.

A good portion of the Jedi Order was gathered in the courtyard. The occasion was simple: following the bomb threat in the Eastern Wing, Delphina had been detained, given a trial, and ejected from the Order. Nick had slept through most of the process, but waking up to the news of Delphina's imprisonment had been a gods-sent gift. In the back of his mind, Nick had worried that Delphina would somehow escape her charges. The slender woman would weasel her way out of planting a fucking bomb, and Nick and Eret would have to start all over.

That wasn't the case, though. For the first time in Nick's life, true justice had prevailed.

With Delphina gone from the Order, a new spot on the Council had been opened up. Which brought Nick back to his current companion.

Nick shot Rhodys a warm smile, and again, the expression came more naturally than he'd expected. “I'm glad you got elected,” he said lightly. “I think you'll do some good. For all of us.”

Rhodys' eyes crinkled at the corners. “Thank you, Sapnap,” the Trandoshan murmured. “As my first act as Councilmember... I'd like to apologize to you for the many years you've had to endure me. I recognize that I haven't been a model Jedi, both in my treatment of you and my views on life. I am truly sorry.”

The Trandoshan dipped in a low bow. Nick wanted to accept the apology gracefully, with some speech of his own about how no one is perfect, and he was simply glad that Rhodys had changed. But his words stuck in his throat. Rhodys had never been cruel to him, but the Trandoshan had never been kind, either. Yet, in the span of a few days and a few conversations, Nick had found Rhodys to be a good soul.

“S'okay,” Nick mumbled eventually. He mentally slapped himself for how childlike he sounded and quickly added, “Sounds like George got to you, too.”

Rhodys chuckled. “It wasn't just him,” they murmured, and a faraway look entered their eyes. “Yourself and Eret contributed. Believe it or not, Eret approached me a few days before the bomb went off. He told me about your encounter with Delphina and how she threatened both of you. That... well, that opened my eyes quite a bit. I've been blind for... quite some time.”

The Trandoshan's Force presence dimmed, and a sense of melancholy settled over Nick's soul. Change and reform were coming to the Order. It had started the day that George had returned, and things had been changing every day since then. But the process wasn't as triumphant as Nick had always expected. He just felt... tired.

No matter. At least things were changing. Rhodys would be good for the Order; Nick could feel it.

“Big shoes to fill,” Nick noted absently. Rhodys shot him a confused look, and Nick shrugged. “Delphina might have been a traitorous bitch, but she was strong. It's hard to follow someone like that into office.”

Rhodys rolled their eyes, tucking their hands into the sleeves of their robes. “I know what I'm doing, Sapnap,” the Jedi Master said archly, though a smile tugged at their mouth. “Besides, I have Pyre to keep me in check. If she doesn't like my plans, then I'll have to reevaluate them.”

A laugh bubbled out before Nick could stop it. "You care that much about her opinion?"

"Of course. She's my padawan, Sapnap."

That simple sentence was so heartfelt and innocent that Nick decided not to argue against Rhodys' new policy. After all, Pyre did seem like a good, sweet kid. If Nick stood on his toes, he could see the girl across the way, playing with some other padawans. As far as Nick could tell, she was a human with fiery red hair, glowing amber eyes, and dark brown skin.

Nick glanced at Rhodys, taking in the Trandosha's shining gaze. Sometimes, Nick wished that he'd had a better Master. His relationship and tutelage under Dante had left... quite a bit to be desired.

"Morning, gents. How are we doing?"

Nick flinched and whipped around, staring at the Jedi Master who had suddenly appeared at his right shoulder. Even after he registered the voice, his heart continued its frantic drumbeat. "In Tibulta's Name, Eret," Nick hissed. "I can't fucking see you on that side."

Eret's jovial smile slipped. "Sorry," the Jedi Master murmured, and guilt pricked at Nick's heart. "I didn't... never mind. Sorry about that." A grin returned to Eret's face, though it was clearly forced. "Congratulations, Rhodys. I thought I should talk to you before I disappeared into the crowd."

Rhodys reached across Nick and shook Eret's outstretched hand with a mirroring smile. For some reason, the peaceful exchange made Nick happy. It wasn't often that he saw two Jedi Masters interact so respectfully.

"I appreciate it, Eret," Rhodys said, their eyes still shining. "I look forward to working with you more closely."

Eret inclined his head a little. "Likewise."

Nick didn't feel awkward, exactly, but he knew when his part in a conversation was over. So he took two steps backward and looked around, searching for an empty space that he could occupy. But before he could leave, Eret grabbed his arm.

"Wait, Sapnap," Eret muttered. The Jedi Master's gaze had hardened, and the sudden change made Nick's stomach curl in very uncomfortable ways. "I have news about Delphina."

Panic quickly drowned out Nick's nerves. "Did she escape?" he demanded.

"No, no, nothing like that. She's still secure in the Detention Center, and with any luck, she'll stay there. But a few of us from the Council searched through everything in her room. There was all the typical junk, of course, but there was also a crushed communicator."

For a moment, Nick struggled to process the implications. "A communicator?" he repeated dumbly. "So that's how she talked to Aries?"

"No, it was built for short-range communication. Delphina was talking to someone else in the Temple."

The penny dropped. A horrible, black sludge seeped into Nick's stomach and engulfed his soul in complete and utter despair. "There's more than one traitor," Nick whispered. He shot Eret a desperate look, praying to all the gods that he'd gotten it wrong. Eret didn't say a word. "Oh, fucking- there's another traitor. *There's*- Eret, we gotta--"



Eret suddenly clasped Nick's shoulder, and the contact broke through the haze of panic that had clouded Nick's mind. Nick blinked a few times, trying to steady his shaky breaths.

"We'll worry about that later, okay?" Eret murmured. The Jedi Master's voice was soft, and for some reason, it made Nick feel like a padawan again. Not in a bad way, though. Just... safe. "Right now, we're supporting Rhodys. They're a good Jedi. They will help us."

Nick inhaled deeply. *Rhodys*, he thought. The Trandoshan stood passively a couple of feet away, their emerald scales glittering like tiny gemstones. *Yeah. Rhodys is good.*

It took a few more seconds of deep breathing before Nick stopped trembling. He felt so stupid having to be comforted by Eret. But at the same time, Eret's silver eyes held no judgment. Simple acceptance wasn't something Nick had experienced very often.

"Okay," Nick rasped eventually. A relieved look crossed Eret's face, and Nick managed a weak smile. "Okay."

Eret squeezed his shoulders once. "Don't be sorry. You almost lost an eye, Sapnap; there's no shame in being a little shaky."

A sick feeling spread through Nick's chest. Even once Eret released him with a gentle smile, the feeling didn't fade.

Shame.

Nick didn't like talking about shame. As soon as someone brought that emotion up, Nick shied away or left the conversation entirely, determined to avoid shedding light on the feeling buried deep within his chest. In part, it was because he didn't like having hard conversations with other people. But honestly, it was because Nick didn't like talking about his own shame.

And no matter how much Nick liked Eret or how comfortable the Jedi Master made him feel, Nick's shame was his burden to bear alone.

"I'll talk to you later, Eret," Nick said quietly, leaning close to the other man to make himself heard. "Be safe."

Eret glanced at him, an unspoken question flashing through his eyes. But the Jedi Master said nothing, and Nick slipped into the crowd with only a polite farewell to Rhodys. His skin immediately began to crawl, presenting him with ghostly memories from the night of the Eastern Wing bombing.

Padawans complained and wailed as they were dragged from their beds. The older padawans, clearly having caught on, cast Nick horrified looks as he ran past. Jedi rushed around the courtyard, waving their arms, and the constant tick of the bomb was loud in Nick's ears.

Tick... tick... tick...

*It didn't go off*, Nick told himself irritably. *The Eastern Wing is fine. I can see it right there.*

Tick... tick... tick...

*Delphina is in prison. I don't have to worry about her anymore. Hell, Clay and Techno even made it back from level 2 alive. We are fucking winning right now.*

Tick... tick...

*We're fine. I'm fine!*

**Tick...**

Nick snarled and forcibly wrenched himself out of his head. Slowly, his eyes refocused on the tan and brown robes of the nearby Jedi and the blinding blue of the sky. As he clenched his fists, trying to steady his shaking hands, a mop of brown hair suddenly appeared between two Jedi. Nick frowned, paused, and backtracked a step.

George stood in the shadows of a thin tree, dark eyes flicking across the crowd.

Nick inhaled quietly. He hadn't talked to George since the rescue party had returned from the Underworld. It was the first time in his life that Nick had actively avoided George. And, if Nick was honest with himself, five days was far too long for him to be petty.

"Georgie!" Nick called, striding towards the engineer. George looked up expectantly at the call, and Nick barely kept from wincing at the panicked look that flashed across the other man's face. Alright, so this wasn't going to be easy for either of them.

"Hey, Nick," George called back haltingly. Nick settled himself at the engineer's shoulder, and George shot him a hesitant smile. "What's up?"

"Nothing much. I'm just here to support Rhodys. They're over there if you want to talk to them."

"I see. When did you two become such good friends?"

"When you were rescuing Clay."

"Oh."

Nick mentally kicked himself. He'd come off as so much more passive-aggressive than he'd meant to, and George's Force presence was all but hidden behind mental shields. He had to calm down. Nick took another deep breath, then turned to face George fully.

"I'm sorry," Nick blurted. George's eyebrows rose into his hairline, and Nick hurried on. "I know, that sounds fucking stupid. But I acted really childish when you left, and I was jealous that I couldn't do anything to help Clay. Like, I was fucking worried, y'know? And you just... went ahead and did it all yourself. So I'm really sorry for being weird when you left. Thank you for... bringing him back."

Again, Nick wished that his little speech could have been more eloquent. But it was the best he could do, and he prayed that it was enough.

For a long moment, George was quiet. The engineer stared at the floor, seemingly fascinated by the cracked tile beneath their feet. Nick just waited with bated breathe. George was under no obligation to accept Nick's apology, but... Nick didn't want to fight. He and George were best friends before anything else.

Finally, after what felt like a millennium of silence, George looked up.

"You don't have to apologize," the engineer murmured.

Nick scowled. "Don't fucking say that after I *just* said I'm sorry. Gods."

"Sorry, sorry. I accept your apology. Thank you. But, uh, I want to apologize as well. Not because

I'm pitying you or something; I really just want to apologize. I shouldn't have said that you weren't experienced enough to help Clay. I thought that I'd do better in the Underworld because I've lived there for years, but..." A haunted look crossed George's face. "I didn't. I should have let you come with us."

Nick blinked. "You think I wasn't experienced enough?" he repeated, bewildered.

George winced, twisting the hem of his jacket. "Yeah. Look, I know it's stupid, but I thought--"

"No, like... that's it?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"You never finished your sentence. I thought that you were going to say that I wasn't strong enough."

George let out a startled laugh, and Nick almost smiled at the blush that immediately colored the other man's cheeks. "No, Nick," George murmured, gently bumping Nick's shoulder. "You're plenty strong. I should never have said anything."

There were plenty of philosophical ways that Nick could describe the relief he felt. However, in the simplest terms, he felt like an idiot.

*I'm so fucking petty*, Nick thought dryly. "Don't worry about it," was what he said aloud. "It's better that I was here, anyway. Someone needed to help Tubbo and deal with Delphina's fucking bomb. So, what did you do while I was avoiding you?"

Nick knew he probably shouldn't change the subject in such a cavalier way. But George's grin was infectious, and Nick decided that they could have a deep heart-to-heart at a later date.

"I fixed up that second lightsaber I snagged from Ejas," George chirped. Nick nodded, just to make sure that George knew he hadn't understood a word, and the engineer rolled his eyes. "Okay, I'll use smaller words. When Clay and I went into the Underworld the first time, we visited a friend of mine and traded for a broken lightsaber. I fixed it."

"How was that any easier to understand?" Nick muttered. "You just put more words together." George elbowed him sharply, but the other man's playful grin nulled the pain. "Ow. Can I see it?"

George grabbed something from his right hip, and suddenly, Nick realized that the engineer carried a lightsaber on each hip. *That's so badass*, Nick thought, more impressed and jealous than he wanted to admit. *I want two lightsabers*.

"Here," George said, holding out a bronze hilt.

Nick took the offered lightsaber. It was perfectly balanced, just a lightsaber should be, and it glinted from George's expert care. Nick could even feel the glow of the Kyber crystal buried in the metal.

"It's amazing," Nick breathed, and he truly meant it. "How the fuck did you get a Kyber crystal? WE don't have those just lying around."

"No," George agreed. "But the Underworld does. I collected a few over the years, and when we swung by my shop to get plating for Philza's arm, I snagged a crystal. Turns out, Kyber crystals are fine powering lightsabers when their owners aren't Force-sensitive."

Nick shook his head and passed the lightsaber back to George. "You're insane."

"Just a little."

The two of them stood in silence. Though they were quiet, Nick was relieved at how peaceful the air between them was. He'd never been able to stand tension between him and George. It felt wrong on every level.

He'd also never liked having only two of them together.

"Where's Clay?" Nick asked. "I haven't seen him for a few days."

George's expression darkened, and Nick's stomach twisted at the sight. "He's been in his room," the engineer muttered. "I haven't seen him since Rhodys was officially elected."

Nick nodded once. When Rhodys had been elected to the Council, they had graciously relinquished control of the task force. They were going to have enough on their plate without trying to manage a whole investigation on the side.

That someone had been Clay.

And Nick could only pray that his best friend hadn't run himself into the ground.

---

Clay's eyes burned. Words blurred together into indistinct blobs, and every face and date became nothing more than pieces of information that floated one ear and out the other. For hours, Clay ignored his body's pleas for a break. Eventually, though, he realized he'd read an entire file without retaining any information. That was when Clay finally tore his gaze from his holographic screen.

Was his behavior was obsessive and unhealthy? Yes. Clay was perfectly willing to admit that and would go as far as to classify himself in desperate need of outside help.

But Clay had been handed the answers to all the questions he'd ever asked, and he'd be damned if he wasted any time in learning the Council's secrets. Besides, each passing day brought a greater chance of another attack – either from Aries or someone who saw how weakened the Temple was. Clay had to be ready. Always read...

The world blacked out for a second.

When Clay blinked himself back to awareness, he was sprawled on the ground, his chair tipped over next to him. *What the hell?* Clay thought blearily. *I was just... I was just sitting up, right?*

Far too slowly, Clay's mushy brain put the pieces of the puzzle together. When he'd pushed away from his desk, he'd probably tipped over and landed on the floor. Clay huffed a laugh and propped himself up on his elbows.

His room looked weird from a ground view. Clay hadn't laid on the carpet once since getting the code to the room, which was strange. Running on too little sleep and fueled by manic energy and stress, the only thing Clay wanted to do was lay down.

"Master, Tommy complained for a whole week after Wilbur overworked himself. Do you want me to do the same thing?"

Clay flinched at the sudden voice, and he craned his neck back as far as it could go. Tubbo stood in

the doorway to Clay's bedroom, wearing an amused smile.

“How long have you been standing there?” Clay demanded though he wasn't really bothered at Tubbo's appearance. “How'd you even get in here?”

Tubbo shrugged slightly, striding across the room. Clay had to twist awkwardly to follow his padawan's progress across the room.

“It's been a few hours, Master,” Tubbo snickered. He crouched at Clay's side, and Clay gratefully returned his neck to its proper position. “Plus, I know the code to get in. And even if I didn't, it's pretty easy to hack in. The security here is fucking stupid.”

Tubbo's cheeks were flushed with life, and the brown-haired boy's eyes glittered. Clay couldn't stop a dopey smile from spreading across his face. It had been so long since he'd seen Tubbo look like anything more than a ghost. An entire month of Temple attacks would destroy most adult Jedi... Clay was just happy that Tubbo's was still intact.

“Don't worry,” Clay murmured. “I'm more stable than Wilbur.”

Tubbo cocked an eyebrow. “And that's why you're laying on the floor, having just fallen over because you literally couldn't balance?”

“Are you giving me attitude, Tubbo?”

“No, Master, not at all. I'm just reasonably worried about you.”

Clay chuckled and held out a hand. Tubbo immediately hauled him to his feet, which Clay only realized was a bad idea when the world spun before his eyes. He groaned at the kaleidoscopic mush of colors, slumping forward against his desk.

“Holy Kantos, Master... I thought you said you're better than Wilbur.”

Tubbo's voice was quiet, almost delicate. Even with his eyes clouded by dark spots, Clay could perfectly picture the heartbroken expression that painted his padawan's face. Guilt squeezed his heart into knots.

“Hey, don't worry,” Clay chided. He blinked a few times, and finally, his vision cleared. Tubbo gazed back at him with weary eyes. “You're right. I'm sorry that I got so... obsessive. I'll take a break in a minute, I promise.” Some of the darkness cleared from Tubbo's face, and an idea suddenly struck Clay. “Help me pick up my chair. I wanna show you something.”

Tubbo tilted his head slightly but said nothing. The two of them lifted Clay's chair back onto its feet, and Clay sank into it. Tubbo hovered at his shoulder. For just a moment, Clay simply smiled at how vibrant his padawan's Force presence was. It gleamed a brilliant lime green, shining like a miniature star.

Clay was so lucky that Tubbo had survived all of this. He'd never leave his padawan again.

“Master?” Tubbo asked slowly, a teasing smile quirking his mouth. “What's the thing you want me to see?”

Clay snapped out of his stupor. “Sorry. I'm a little tired.”

“I can tell.”

Clay rolled his eyes fondly, slapping his padawan's arm. Tubbo yelped and smacked Clay's hand in retaliation. Once Clay officially won their competition (he managed to chase Tubbo away from his desk with a pen), he returned his attention to his hologram and opened one of the many files he'd been pouring over.

"This is all the information we have on Aries," Clay explained, double-tapping the screen. A shadowed picture took over the whole hologram, and Clay scowled at the indistinct silhouette. "And this is the best picture we have of him. I got it from a contact a few days ago, and we're damn lucky to have this much. He's a ghost in the system."

Tubbo nodded slowly. Something about his padawan's expression changed, though Clay couldn't figure out what. He chalked it up to his exhaustion and continued his explanation.

"The best lead we have is that Aries wants something in the Temple. He's built an empire on black market deals, and we don't have the time or resources to get an expert we can trust in here. If we knew what he wanted, we might be able to protect it. Or just give it to him if it doesn't impact us."

This time, the fearful flinch of Tubbo's Force presence was unmistakable. The brown-haired boy's hands trembled. What the hell was going on?

"We're pretty sure that he's working alone," Clay said slowly, watching Tubbo as subtly as he could. However, being subtle didn't seem to matter. Tubbo stared at Aries' picture with wide, panicked eyes, and the boy's Force presence swirled like a tempest. "When I was more involved in the Underworld, Aries was famous for working alone. So it's likely that the Night Thief and whoever else has attacked the Temple are independent parties. A lack of loyalty makes it easier for us, though."

"That's not right," Tubbo whispered.

Clay blinked. "What?"

"Loyalty. They-"

Tubbo inhaled sharply, and suddenly, it was like a switch had been flipped. All the turmoil in Tubbo's Force presence disappeared, and the darkness cleared from his padawan's icy eyes. All of a sudden, Tubbo was back to normal.

"They can't be completely independent," Tubbo continued as if he hadn't just been shaking in his skin. "Or they would have stopped trying by now. I mean, it's been what? A month and a half since the first attack, a month since George got here? The Night Thief has probably gotten a ton of jobs since then, but he's ignoring them and working with Aries. Maybe Aries is blackmailing all these people or something."

Clay said nothing. He just stared at his padawan's passive face, bewildered. What the fuck had just happened? He'd never seen Tubbo look so... terrified. Aries might have been their enemy for the past month, but Tubbo had looked at Aries like the man had killed someone he loved.

Something was very, very wrong.

Clay wasn't a fool. Upon his return, both Nick and Eret had shared their concerns about Tubbo's odd behavior. The boy was constantly on edge, flinching at anything and jittery no matter the occasion. It had gotten to the point where Nick had considered talking to him.

A long, long conversation was in order. As soon as Clay finished looking over the task force files, he'd called Tubbo back into his room, and they'd talk over dinner.

“Hey,” Clay said gently, nudging his padawan's shoulder. Tubbo flinched as if he'd been struck. “I'm sorry for bringing this up. Didn't you say that you were going to hang out with Wilbur and Tommy today?”

Pure panic flashed across Tubbo's face. “What time is it?” the brown-haired boy demanded, leaning towards Clay's hologram without waiting for an answer.

Worry built in Clay's heart, and he gently pushed Tubbo's head away, looking at the digital clock for himself. “Almost noon,” he reported. “Why?”

What Clay expected to happen was that Tubbo explained why he was so frantic, then they would say a peaceful goodbye. Instead, Clay turned and found Tubbo already out the door. The only thing Clay heard before his padawan disappeared around the doorframe was a rushed “I'll see you tonight for dinner!”

Clay blinked, and Tubbo was gone. For a few seconds, all he could do was sit there and try to process what had just happened.

Tubbo clearly wasn't okay. But *why*? That was the magic question that would solve everything, both in regards to Tubbo, Aries and just... fucking everything. Everything was one big question mark, and Clay hated it. They hadn't made any progress since the first attack on the Temple!

Then again, that was why he'd been assigned as leader of the task force.

Clay heaved a heavy sigh, turning back to his desk and refocusing on the files at his disposal. Clay started to open a file on Aries' unconfirmed business partners, then paused.

It couldn't hurt to talk to Wilbur, right? The other man was a Master to a rambunctious padawan, just like Clay was, and gods knew that Wilbur cared for Tubbo like a younger brother. In fact, Wilbur would probably *want* to know how worried Clay was.

Before Clay could talk himself out of it, he pulled up a direct line to Wilbur on his hologram. The other Jedi Master responded on the first ring.

*“What's up, Dream?”*

“Tubbo's going to hang out with you guys today, right?” Clay asked, trying not to feel like an overbearing idiot.

*“Yeah, he and Tommy are going to the obstacle course, and I'm gonna make sure they don't break anything. Why? Does he have to cancel?”*

“No, he's on his way,” Clay murmured. He glanced out the window, and the tail end of Tubbo's robes caught the sunlight. “But I'm worried. He's acting... weird. Just keep an eye on him, please. Well, more than usual. I'd feel better.”

*“I will. Don't worry, Dream; I'll keep him safe.”*

At that, Clay smiled a little. “I trust you,” he said, and for the second time in as many days, he was amazed to find that he meant it. First Techno, now Wilbur. Clay never would have imagined trusting the two Sleepy Boys so wholly, and yet... they were good people. “Thanks, Wilbur. I appreciate it.”

*“Don't mention it. I gotta go for now, or Tommy's gonna have my ass for being late. I'll talk to you later.”*

Wilbur ended the call, and Clay leaned back his chair. Tubbo was faint and distant through their bond, hidden behind walls that Clay had only noticed a few days previous. Clay absently tapped the mental shields. His probe was knocked away like a leaf in a hurricane.

Something was definitely wrong with Tubbo. Clay only hoped that his padawan would tell him what was going on.

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“No, Tommy, you can't get a pet,” Wilbur sighed exasperatedly. His padawan immediately scrunched up his nose, and Wilbur flicked Tommy's arm. He ignored the blond boy's overdramatic howl of pain. “Where the fuck would you even keep it? The Padawan Quarters? You don't even sleep there half the time!”

“That is entirely your fault,” Tommy snapped. “If you would just put your foot down and show some fucking spine, I'd be sleeping in the Padawan Quarters like I'm suppose to! You enabled me!”

“I tell you to stop making a crease in my couch every single fucking night! How else am I suppose to-”

Streaks of red-hot pain suddenly shot up Wilbur's right shin, and he hissed, stumbling to the side. Luckily, Tommy caught before he toppled into a planter or something equally uncomfortable.

“Are you alright?” Tommy demanded. All vestiges of teasing light had disappeared from the blond boy's face, replaced by strained worry. “What's wrong?”

Wilbur tried to say that he was fine, but the splitting pain clogged the words in his throat. Finally, the white patches cleared from his eyes. Wilbur took several deep breaths before opening his mouth. “Fine,” he mumbled. Wilbur glared down at his right shin, which was covered by a bacta patch. “I thought the doctors said that this thing was fucking healed. That's what they *just* said, right?”

Tommy scowled slightly. “If you'd stop walking on it,” the blond boy muttered peevishly. “But here you are, hobbling along like an old man and making it fucking worse! Tubbo and I can take care of ourselves!”

Wilbur leveled a glare at his padawan, which Tommy instantly returned. “No, you *can't*. The last time I agreed to let you two do something by yourselves, you showed up three hours after curfew with two twisted ankles and a fractured ulna!”

For a moment, they just glared at each other. Then another spike of pain stabbed Wilbur's shin, and he swore under his breath, collapsing against Tommy. His padawan didn't complain.

“Just get me to the fucking obstacle course,” Wilbur ordered, letting his eyes flutter shut for just a moment. “I'll sit down once we get there.”

Wilbur could feel Tommy's eyes burning a hole into the side of his face. But his padawan said nothing, and after a few seconds of getting situated, the two of them began hobbling along. Wilbur tried not to think about how stupid they had to look.

Yes, it was true; Wilbur didn't really need to accompany Tommy and Tubbo to the obstacle course. The gigantic game of parkour had been established right next to the training arena, which was under constant vigilance by at least one Jedi. But Wilbur refused to let Tommy out of his sight. Besides, the infirmary was more or less on the way, and Wilbur had had an appointment. Two



birds, one stone.

Wilbur hadn't liked the verdict of his appointment, though. All the doctors had done was shrug helplessly and tell him that some injuries took a long time to heal. Then they'd handed him *another* bacta patch and shooed him and Tommy out.

*Pricks*, Wilbur thought darkly. *They're supposed to fucking help me, not tell me what I already know.*

In truth, Wilbur didn't blame the doctors at all. He was just sleep-deprived, irritated, and on edge from a month and a half on constant vigilance and wear and tear. Wilbur had experienced more emotional warfare in the past month than he had in his entire life.

He couldn't even imagine how Tommy felt.

Wilbur carefully lifted his free hand to Tommy's head and gently ruffled his padawan's hair. Tommy squeezed his arm in response, though the meager affection earned Wilbur a prim, "I'm not a kid, Will. You don't need to reassure me for fucking nothing."

"Don't call me 'Will,'" Wilbur said, more out of habit than any actual annoyance. Tommy shot him a tired grin, which Wilbur returned. "And you're still a kid. You can't fool me."

*I wish you weren't. You shouldn't have to go through all this.*

It was the same silent apology that Wilbur had been thinking of for weeks. It echoed around his head no matter where he was or what he was doing, and its constant presence exhausted Wilbur. He could be apologetic all he wanted, but that wouldn't change their fucked situation. It only made Wilbur feel worse and worse.

He'd deal with it later. Wilbur adjusted himself on Tommy's shoulder, which earned him a confused look from his padawan, then muttered,

"Let's hurry up. I want to make sure there aren't any fucking ninjas waiting for us."

"We're already ahead of schedule," Tommy said slowly. "We don't really need to hurry up."

Wilbur glanced down at the blond boy. The sight of Tommy's innocent confusion made his heart stutter and ache worse than ever. *I need to do something*, he thought desperately. *Or I'm going to fall apart.* "Just do it," he ordered aloud. "Being early never killed anyone."

It was a poor choice of words. Wilbur wasn't even sure if he'd managed to keep his pathetic pleas away from Tommy's constant mental probes. Whatever the case, Tommy nodded silently and picked up the pace. Wilbur ignored the knives of pain that stabbed his shin with every step.

It was a beautiful day. The sky glowed a brilliant blue, and the sun warmed Wilbur's skin like a gentle flame. In Wilbur's opinion, there weren't enough days like this on Coruscant. Things always seemed cloudy and gloomy.

Or maybe Wilbur just projected his mood on the weather. He'd never paid much attention to the weather before all of *this*.

Kissed by the sun and supported by Tommy, Wilbur found himself drifting into a relaxed state. Tension slipped away from his shoulders like he was shedding a cape.

But something had changed in Wilbur over the past month. Before the first attack, he'd been able to

relax so easily, even to the point where Tommy could startle him. Now, Wilbur never really let his guard down – not even when he slept.

So, even in the peace of the warm afternoon sun, Wilbur kept himself alert and aware.

And that was when he felt it.

A single malicious intention, whistling towards him and Tommy.

“Move!” Wilbur barked. He shoved Tommy away from him, already planning to dive backward and avoid whatever fucked-up thing Aries had sent after them now. But Tommy didn't tumble to the ground with an indignant cry. Instead, the blond boy steadied himself and gave Wilbur a bewildered look.

“Move?” Tommy repeated. “Why the fuck do you want me to move?”

Panic stabbed through Wilbur's chest, stopping his train of thought dead in its tracks. Tommy was still on his feet. *Tommy was still-*

The malicious intention sailed at them from Wilbur's right and plunged into Tommy's neck. Everything slowed down to a snail's pace, and Wilbur could only watch, fear and rage choking him, as Tommy's eyes rolled back in his head. Wilbur tried to reach out to his padawan, but his arms weren't moving. Why weren't his *gods-damned arms moving?!*

Then everything sped up again. Wilbur lunged forward and barely managed to catch Tommy before the blond boy hit the ground. As soon as he settled his padawan in his arms, Wilbur scrambled backward. Two more darts hit the place where he'd been standing, narrowly missing Wilbur's foot and Tommy's limp hand.

“Come on, Tommy,” Wilbur whispered frantically. He had no idea where he was backing up to, but there had to be something nearby that could offer protection. “Come on, come on, stay with me.”

Tommy let out a slurred mumble, eyes rolling behind closed eyes. Wilbur's chest constricted three sizes too tight. *Please, gods, no, not Tommy*, he thought desperately. Tears clouded his eyes, but Wilbur fiercely shook them away. *Not Tommy. Not fucking today.*

Wilbur's back hit something solid. He looked around frantically and realized that he'd run into the pillars of an overhang. Good enough. Wilbur drove his heels into the ground and hauled Tommy into the shadows, just narrowly missing another dart.

As soon as the two of them were hidden by the low wall, Wilbur lowered Tommy onto the sidewalk and released his death grip. Pain raced up and down Wilbur's spine like a superconductor of pain, but Wilbur ignored it. He shoved himself to all fours, took a gasping breath, and leaned over his padawan.

*Tommy?* Wilbur whispered through their bond. *C'mon, Tommy, talk to me.*

He was met with nothing but incoherent gibberish.

Panic threatened to tip Wilbur into oblivion. Gods, what was this? What *now*? Why was Aries so determined to hurt every single innocent person in the Temple, starting with Wilbur's *fucking padawan*? Why them?!

Something silver caught Wilbur's eye, breaking him from his hysteria. The dart in Tommy's neck was silver. Its effects had been immediate, and Tommy was clearly not in his right mind.

This was the same dart that had taken Phil out all those weeks ago.

This was the same dart that had brought the Jedi Master to the edge of death, to the point where it had taken Techno's fucking Force power to save him.

Oh, gods, no.

Wilbur's body lurched into action before his brain had even finished processing. One second, he was hunched over his padawan, barely able to breathe. The next, Wilbur's hands were flying across Tommy's body. He first plucked the dart from Tommy's neck, then ripped the bacta patch from his shin. As carefully as he could, Wilbur settled the patch over Tommy's neck.

He had no idea what bacta would do for a neurological poison. But, with any luck, it would be enough to counteract whatever poison had made its way into Tommy's system.

Wilbur whirled and snatched the dart from the ground. It was such an innocuous little thing. The urge to crush the damned dart was nearly overwhelming, but Wilbur fought it back and held the silver harbinger up to the light.

With illumination, the dart became see-through. Some sort of blue liquid sloshed around inside. And, to Wilbur's immense relief, the dart was almost full.

Almost none of the poison had entered Tommy's body. Thank the gods.

Wilbur glanced down at his padawan. Tommy's eyes had stopped rolling around, and the blond boy's body was blessedly still. "I'm so sorry, Tommy," Wilbur whispered. He carefully set the dart next to the wall, then returned to his vigil at his padawan's side. "I'm so fucking sorry. You'll be okay, I *promise*. We won't-"

Another dart whistled overhead. Wilbur quickly flattened himself to the sidewalk, hot tears stinging his eyes. This was so fucked. Gods, how he wished this was all a dream. He might have believed it if not for the rough scratch of the sidewalk on his cheek and the sound of Tommy's shuddering breaths. If not for the hell he'd lived through thus far.

It wasn't fair.

Wilbur didn't know how long he laid there, hands clutched over his neck as he clung to Tommy's fluctuating Force presence. His padawan remained unconscious, but Tommy's Force presence never once dimmed. Wilbur took that as a good sign.

Suddenly, the air fell silent. No darts whistled overhead, and Tommy's heaving breaths had calmed. Wilbur almost sobbed.

He and Tommy had survived yet again.

"Wilbur! Tommy!"

The shout shattered Wilbur's fragile hopes of survival. He looked around frantically and immediately found Tubbo racing full-tilt for them, eyes wide with panic.

*Turn around!* Wilbur screamed mentally, using every bit of Force power he had to project the thought. *Get the fuck out of here!*

Either Tubbo ignored him, or Wilbur wasn't strong enough. Regardless, Tubbo made it all way to the overhand and dropped to his knees, looking between Wilbur and Tommy wildly.

“What are you doing here?” Tubbo demanded. The boy looked on the edge of tears. “You're not supposed to fucking be here!”

Wilbur opened his mouth to snap that Tubbo wasn't supposed to be here, either. But then, puzzle pieces slotted together in his head. Dream had been worried about his padawan's behavior, hadn't he? And now, with Tubbo in front of him, Wilbur could see how badly the brown-haired boy's hands were shaking – and how pale Tubbo was.

And then there were Tubbo's first words. Not concern for Tommy, not confusion as to what they were doing. None of that.

*What are you doing here? You're not supposed to be fucking be here!*

Wilbur shuffled backward and fixed Tubbo with a cold stare. “What did you do?” he hissed.

Tubbo flinched. Wilbur knew that his voice had come out harsh and frosty, but he couldn't find it in himself to care. Because the pieces were finally falling together in his head, and Wilbur couldn't believe that he'd ever been so blind.

And deep inside himself, Wilbur's heart was cracking into shards that he wouldn't be able to put back together.

“Please just listen to me,” Tubbo whispered frantically. The padawan reached for Wilbur's arm, but Wilbur smacked the hand away. Tubbo recoiled with tears gathering in his icy eyes. “Please, Wilbur, you have to get out of here! It's- it's-”

Tubbo trailed off into a choked sob, and for just a moment, Tubbo's Force presence exploded to life in Wilbur's mind. Agony, anguish, and mind-numbing fear swirled around the brown-haired boy like a tempest. Tubbo sat in the middle of it all with tears streaming down his face and a tortured scream burning his heart. Then it vanished behind a blank canvas. Belatedly, Wilbur realized that Tubbo's mental shields had been crafted to perfection. But that wasn't the point.

Tubbo was dying inside his own skin.

“I'm sorry, I'm sorry,” Wilbur murmured. He scrambled forward and grabbed Tubbo's shoulders, desperately scanning the padawan's face for some kind of explanation. Tubbo stared back at him with thinly-veiled hope. “It's okay. We have to leave, right?”

Tubbo nodded too many times. “Now. The padawan's voice cracked on the single word. “*Please.*”

Wilbur needed no further encouragement. He hurried back to Tommy's side and slipped his arms underneath his padawan's shoulders. “Grab his legs,” Wilbur ordered. “We'll move him into the Temple.”

Again, Tubbo nodded, and the brown-haired boy settled his hands around Tommy's ankles. Wilbur took a deep breath, mentally preparing to ignore the pain that would consume his shin.

Then a new voice echoed through the air.

“Master Wilbur!”

The voice was unfamiliar to Wilbur, but Tubbo's eyes immediately widened to the size of plates.

“Oh, gods, *no*,” Tubbo choked out. The padawan dropped Tommy's feet, then whirled around, and frustration built in Wilbur's chest like a geyser. He was just about to scream for Tubbo to get

Tommy's fucking feet when a man came jogging around the corner.

It was a Falleen with forest green skin, black hair pulled back into a loose ponytail, and brilliant red eyes that surveyed the scene with sharp intelligence. He wore the garb of the nurse, which was probably why he looked vaguely familiar, and he held a small vial in his hands.

But at that moment, Wilbur couldn't have cared less about the man before him. Because the Falleen was blocking their only escape.

"Padawan Tubbo?" the Falleen asked, brow furrowed. "And Padawan Tommy. What is going on here?"

Tubbo scrambled to his feet before the Falleen even finished his sentence. "Please, Val, you have to go," Tubbo babbled, gripping the nurse's shoulders and shaking him roughly. "Please, just go. I'll explain everything later, I promise. Go!"

Val brushed Tubbo's hands away with a worried frown. "Calm down, Padawan Tubbo," he said soothingly. "What's wrong?"

Wilbur inhaled to tell Val to listen to Tubbo and grab Tommy so they could fucking escape.

Somewhere in the distance, a laser fired. For a moment, the world stood still. Then Val heaved a dry cough, and Wilbur realized that a hole had been seared through the Falleen's temples. He could only watch helplessly as Val choked, twitched, then collapsed against the wall with blank eyes.

Tubbo's frame shuddered. The padawan's impeccable shields wavered, and for a split second, Wilbur could see the pure, unfiltered grief that choked Tubbo like a vice.

"Val," Tubbo sobbed. The brown-haired boy sank to his knees, and slowly, Tubbo laid a shaking hand on the Falleen's shoulder. "No, no, not you... not you..."

Tubbo's anguish was enough to make Wilbur dizzy. He steadied himself against the foreign emotions, then readjusted his grip on his padawan. "Tubbo, grab Tommy," Wilbur hissed. Gods, did he feel like an asshole, but they were all still in imminent danger. Wilbur couldn't move Tommy without-

A new Force presence suddenly appeared at the other end of the courtyard. Wilbur froze as it launched over the far wall, then began sauntering towards them. It was dim, indicating that its owner wasn't Force-sensitive. But it was loud, cocky, and undeniably powerful.

The shooter of the darts and, presumably, the marksman who had killed Val.

With a jolt, Wilbur realized that they'd run out of time. He ripped the bacta patch from Tommy's neck and shoved it into his robes, hiding it underneath the bugle of bandages he wore around his ribcage (courtesy of a table and his defective shin). It wasn't a moment too soon.

A man stepped underneath the overhang and shot Wilbur a brilliant, lop-sided smile. The man was lean, with pale, slender fingers poking out of fingerless gloves and a blue sweater engulfing his thin frame. He had dark hair, which was shoved into a black beanie, and loose pants were tucked into ankle-high boots.

"Hey, Tubbo!" the man laughed. The sound was high and clear, ringing through the air like a bell. It instantly set Wilbur's nerves on edge. "These are the two bitches, huh?"

The man's eyes flickered over Wilbur, evidently sizing him up, and Wilbur snarled. The Night

Thief.

“Not so friendly,” the Night Thief noted. The man fiddled with the gun on his belt with practiced ease, and Wilbur wondered if he could grab his lightsaber before the Night Thief could shoot.

“Well, I hear that I'm pretty famous in this fucking Temple! In case you somehow don't recognize me, I'm the Night Thief!” The man dipped in a mock curtsy. “And I'm here to fuck up your lives.”

“You've done that enough already,” Wilbur spat.

The Night Thief collapsed into laughter. Wilbur just watched him silently, wracking his brain for the report that Dream and George had given of the Night Thief. 20 years old and an Underworld thief renowned for stealth. What else, *what else?*

Quackity. The Night Thief's name was Quackity.

*How the fuck does that help me?* Wilbur thought, panic touching the edges of his mind.

Quackity finally stopped laughing, and Wilbur glared back up at the younger man.

“You're already so much more fun than the rest of the Jedi,” Quackity chuckled, tapping his nose.

“They were all so fucking serious. You're all full of life and shit! I bet you're angry at me. I bet you're so angry that I'm here to fuck you up again.”

Wilbur said nothing. He wouldn't give the bastard the satisfaction.

The mirth drained from Quackity's face, and the younger man sighed heavily. “Fine. If you're going to be a bitch.”

Quackity stepped over Val's corpse and nudged Tubbo's shoulder roughly. Wilbur immediately tensed at the contact, but Tubbo looked up at the Night Thief with blank eyes.

“What?” Tubbo croaked.

“These are the two, right?” Quackity said, gesturing vaguely at Wilbur and Tommy. “The fucking Master and Padawan, yeah? The weak links of the Sleepy Boys?”

Tubbo's gaze slid to meet Wilbur's. Wilbur longed for Tubbo to explain what was going on, but deep in his heart, he already knew. And as Wilbur stared into Tubbo's dull eyes, his heart shattered.

“Yeah,” Tubbo mumbled. “It's them.”

Quackity's grin was radiant. “Good job,” the man chuckled, patting Tubbo's shoulder. The padawan flinched away, but either the Night Thief didn't notice, or he ignored it. “Alright! Well, Master Jedi, how do you want to do this? We can do this easy, or I can shoot your padawan and take him in down a leg. It's up to you.”

Rage seared Wilbur's heart like a red-hot brand. He knew he should keep a level head. He knew shouldn't act on impulse. But Tommy was unconscious in his arms, Tubbo was a traitor, and this childish fucker was threatening him.

Wilbur had finally reached his fucking limit.

He sprang out of his crouch, drawing and activating his lightsaber as he went. For just a moment, Fear flickered across Quackity's face, and Wilbur snarled in triumph.

Then his shin screamed in agony, and Wilbur stumbled.

Something hard connected with the back of his head. Wilbur toppled forward, darkness clouding his vision and pain shooting through every part of his body. The last thing Wilbur heard before he was enveloped by ink was Quackity's hysterical laughter.

## Chapter End Notes

I would be lying if I told you that I didn't cry while writing this. I... I cried. It's a little concerning-

Thank you so much for reading! If you are so inclined, please leave a comment with your thoughts! It's always a pleasure to hear from you (and yes, I will be responding to comments again lol. I haven't forgotten about you wonderful people)!

## Bleeding Judas, Part 2

### Chapter Notes

Well, well... fancy seeing you here again!

Hello, my dear readers! I know, I'm back! I bet you almost forgot about me, eh? I certainly haven't forgotten this story, and today, my fingers and my muse decided that it was time! Writing this was a whole roller coaster of emotions, and I hope that you enjoy it as much as I did! I think this chapter serves as a very fitting return from hiatus.

Note: this chapter hasn't undergone my usual editing process. Please excuse any errors; I will revise it throughout this week!

Trigger warning for suicidal thoughts. Always read safely!

Enjoy, my friends!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Techno felt it as soon as it happened. One moment, he was sitting in the mess hall with Phil, quietly sharing a meal. The next, the Force had exploded in Techno's mind, a writhing mass of anger and pain and betrayal. Techno gasped in the face of its ferocity, and for a second, all he could do was fumble for his bond with Phil to steady him.

Then the burst dimmed, just enough for Techno to make out its owner. It was Wilbur. The man was screaming with raw fury.

When Techno blinked again, he found himself halfway out of the mess hall, shouldering his way through the other Jedi who had decided to get a late breakfast.

"Techno!" Phil bellowed from somewhere behind him. "What the fuck are you doing?!"

Techno didn't waste a breath to explain. He just lowered his mental shields (which he'd frantically thrown up upon first being hit by Wilbur's Force presence), and Phil gasped. Fear flew across their bond, and it was all Techno could do to keep running.

Where was he running to? What had happened to Wilbur? Gods, he didn't know; *he didn't know-*

Phil appeared at his elbow. The other man's Force presence slowly enveloped Techno, plucking the desperation and confusion from his mind. *Focus*, Phil ordered gently. *I can't feel him, so I need you to direct me.*

The single command broke Techno from his dazed loop of thoughts, and suddenly, he found himself coherent again. He felt the burn of his legs, felt Wilbur's dimming Force presence. The taller man was either dying or slipping into unconsciousness, and either way, he was running out of time. Techno inhaled as deeply as his pumping arms would allow. Then he reached out into the Force as far as he could go.

Wilbur was on the other side of the Temple, near the training arena. Three other presences floated around him. One was bright blue, wispy underneath the haze of unconsciousness, but still



discernible as Tommy. The second was unfamiliar and weak. And the last.. was nearly hidden underneath impeccable mental shields. But the boil of emotions surrounding them was enough to create a small crack, just enough for Techno to see the person beyond.

Tubbo. It was Tubbo, fear and grief permeating his Force presence like a stain.

“He's a traitor,” Techno whispered aloud. A nauseating mixture of anger and misery suddenly gripped Techno's heart, and he snarled, pushing his body to run faster. “Tubbo's the traitor!” he roared louder. “Come on, Phil!”

Phil didn't respond, but Techno felt a maelstrom of emotions whirl to life within the other man. He felt the same mess of conflict growing in his chest, but he shoved it away with a furious hand. Techno could worry about feeling guilty or betrayed later. Right now, Wilbur had either been killed or knocked out, Tommy was down, Tubbo's Force presence looked like a cracked piece of glass, and some unknown person was with the three of them.

Enough was finally enough. Their enemy could not be allowed to just waltz into the Temple and do whatever they pleased.

Especially not when it involved hurting Techno's friends.

He and Phil whipped through the Temple. They ignored the calls of the Jedi around them, all of whom shouted and asked what was going on. Wilbur's faint Force presence was slowly getting dimmer and dimmer, and with it, the fear in Techno's heart was getting stronger. Even his best attempts to stem it couldn't stamp out the sparks of doubt that questioned whether he'd failed to save Wilbur.

It was something Techno had felt more and more in recent days. He'd spent years holding the Dark Side at bay, but now, he felt more vulnerable than ever. He and Phil had done hundreds of missions together, but one person inside the Temple was enough to bring him fear?

Techno didn't understand. But it wasn't the time to start thinking about that.

They whipped around the last corner, and Techno stumbled to a stop. The small courtyard he and Phil stood in was steeped in echoes. They were recent and so poignant that Techno felt dizzy just standing there. Wilbur's Force presence drifted around, infusing the whole courtyard with rage and agony. Tubbo's was there, too, though less prominent. But the worst echo was one of death.

Techno realized what had happened before he even saw the body. Then his eyes fell on the still body of a Falleen nurse, and his stomach dropped out. “Phil!” he called weakly. His partner, who had been examining something on the ground, immediately hurried to his side. Techno jerked his chin at the body. “We've got our first casualty.”

An expression somewhere between sadness and anger contorted Phil's face. “Gods,” he muttered. “And where the fuck did Wilbur go? I can't even feel him!”

Techno suddenly remembered why he'd taken off at a dead sprint, and he frantically expanded his mind, searching for his absent friend. The Force presences of the Jedi in the Temple were quickly converging on him and Phil. Beyond them, the people living just outside the Temple walls glowed like faint stars. But Wilbur, Tommy, and Tubbo were nowhere to be seen.

“C'mon,” Techno growled aloud. “Where are you?!”

Phil's Force presence wrapped around his mind once again. Techno accepted the power as readily as if it was his own and pushed his mind even further. Where? Where?!

An anomaly suddenly flickered beyond the walls. Techno snapped his attention to it, desperately trying to hone in on the sudden burst of emotion. Hurrying away from the Temple was a space devoid of the Force. As Techno watched, two dim Force presences disappeared underneath the blank patch before flickering back to life.

Someone was shielding Wilbur, Tommy, and Tubbo.

Techno threw the thought into his Force bond, and Phil instantly hissed in understanding. "I'm going after them," Techno said, locking his mind on the blank space. "Catch up as soon as someone shows up to deal with the Falleen."

Phil's response was a hum of agreement through their bond. It was all Techno needed. He took off across the courtyard, throwing himself over the wall and landing in yet another clearing. The next five minutes were spent weaving his way through the Temple's outer courtyards, and Techno's frustration grew with each new clearing that presented itself. The blank space was steadily escaping.

Finally, Techno reached the Temple walls. He launched over the gigantic stone protectors without even sparing a breath, and suddenly, Techno found himself standing in Coruscant's streets. The path before him was blessedly clear. He had a straight shot to his friends.

Techno ran.

The people he passed blended together. Techno was vaguely aware of Phil's Force presence lighting up a corner of his mind, but he spared his partner's thoughts and emotions no attention. If Techno let his mind drift, he would lose his friends.

That couldn't happen. Techno *couldn't* lose his friends.

Was this how Phil had felt when Techno had been kidnapped? Had Wilbur and Tommy been as frantic once they'd realized that Techno had vanished from the Temple?

They'd probably felt worse.

Guilt crept into Techno's throat.

*No!* Techno told himself harshly. He shoved all his emotions aside and strained to keep his hold on the retreating blank space. Whoever was shielding Techno's friends was strong, and Techno struggled to keep his grip on the anomaly. All the Force presences of the Coruscant people were throwing him off.

*I'm coming!*

Phil's voice suddenly appeared in his head, and Techno heaved a sigh of relief. *I'm still chasing them*, he responded, allowing himself a faint ping of comfort at Phil's bright glow. *Just follow me.*

*I'll catch up as soon as I can.*

Techno nodded once to himself. It would be easier to take care of whoever was shielding his friends with Phil's help. One non-Force-sensitive and one Force-sensitive couldn't stand against two Jedi.

But then, a thought occurred to Techno. It was a horrible one, and as soon as it flashed through his mind, Techno tried to push it away. But it was too late. The thought took hold, creeping through his mind like a parasite and gnawing away at his fragile conviction.

The person shielding Wilbur, Tommy, and Tubbo had to be strong. The trio were some of the strongest Jedi Techno knew, and covering them entirely was a nearly impossible feat. So... the person shielding had to be trained. That meant they were either a Jedi, a Sith, or some third party. If they were a Sith or a third party, both posed a terrible threat. That meant someone had snuck onto Coruscant without attracting Jedi attention. If they were a Jedi... that was even worse.

If they were a Jedi, there was a third traitor. Delphina, Tubbo, and someone else.

Bile clogged Techno's throat, and his chest constricted too tight for him to breathe. Who could it be? Who else had turned against them? Was it a friend? Was it someone on the Council?

It could be anyone.

A Force presence suddenly materialized above Techno. He stumbled to a stop at the sudden appearance, and suddenly, he realized he was standing in a narrow alleyway, closed stalls running ahead and behind him. Too late, Techno realized that he'd gotten distracted and run himself right into a trap.

*Am I a failure?*

The intrusive thought sparked a hidden depth of anger, and Techno snarled, diving forward. The crackle of a lightsaber sliced behind him, but Techno escaped unharmed. He unfurled and dug his heels into the concrete, picking his head up to see who had gotten the drop on him.

Techno only had time to see a flash of a silver lightsaber. Then fingers pressed against his temples, and searing pain cascaded through Techno's head. He let out a pained scream, calling upon the Force to push his assailant away. But nothing happened. The pain only intensified, and Techno's thoughts dissolved into an incoherent mess of red-hot pain and anger.

*Techno...*

A figure started to take shape in Techno's thoughts. It radiated malicious energy, and Techno desperately tried to shy away from it. But the figure seemed to grab his chin with frigid fingers, yanking his head up.

*Oh, Techno. You should have known better than to try to get rid of me.*

Dark hair tumbled down the figure's back, and silver skin slowly materialized. The features were as familiar to Techno as his own, and he choked back the sick feeling crawling through his chest. *No*, he wanted to say. *Not again.*

Ra-Lune fully formed. A deranged smile twisted her pretty face, accompanied by a burning red lightsaber.

*"Hello, Techno,"* the Nagai purred. *"It's good to see you."*

For a moment, all Techno could do was stare at the woman in front of him, hatred and fear paralyzing his limbs and leaving him shaking.

Then anger replaced the paralysis.

*"Phil got rid of you,"* Techno spat. *"I got rid of you. Stay out of my head!"*

Ra-Lune laughed, a high, melodic sound. Techno didn't even wait for her to finish laughing. He drove his fist into the Nagai's face, and to his satisfaction, Ra-Lune was thrown backward. She

screached in pain, and instantly, her body began to dissolve. The searing pain in Techno's temples dimmed. It felt as if Techno was throwing off layers and layers of quicksand, but slowly, ever so slowly, he fought his way out of his own thoughts.

With a gasp, Techno broke through the shell enveloping his mind. His eyes flew open, and he found himself sitting in the same alley he'd been jumped in. A hooded figure stood nearby, examining a silver lightsaber.

A cough burst out before Techno could stop it. The hooded figure's head immediately whipped up, and for just a moment, their shields wavered, revealing a wave of shock.

"What?" the figure demanded. "How?"

The voice was distorted by some kind of voice modulator, but a memory stirred in the back of Techno's mind. He couldn't pick out the actual memory, but that didn't matter. He *knew* the voice. It was a Jedi.

Techno snarled. He struggled to his feet, reaching out for the figure's Force presence. His weak probes bounced harmlessly off of their shields, and before he could steady himself, the figure threw out a frantic hand. A Force blast hit Techno square in the chest, and he tumbled backward, landing hard on the cobblestone.

It took a painfully long time for Techno to recover. His mind was still fuzzy from the figure's mental tricks, and his body just didn't respond as he wanted it to. *Come on!* Techno demanded. *Get up!*

Finally, after several minutes too many, Techno's body responded to his commands. Techno struggled to his elbows, looking around the alleyway with dark spots still blotting his vision.

Empty. The figure was gone.

Techno desperately reached to the Force, frantically grabbing at any strings of connection left. There were none. He'd completely lost his hold on the blank space.

Tears threatened to fall. *No*, Techno thought dully. Even though his heart was tearing apart at the seams, Techno couldn't feel anything. *I can't- I can't lose them. Tommy... Wilbur...*

"Techno!"

The familiar voice broke through Techno's haze like a sharp knife, and he snapped to attention, looking around wildly. He quickly picked out Phil's Force presence rushing towards him. A moment later, the blond man flew into the alleyway, racing for him with panic painted across his face.

"What happened?" Phil demanded, dropping to his knees next to Techno. His hands fluttered around helplessly, and his icy eyes flicked across Techno's face. "You completely disappeared for a few minutes there! I was trying to reach out to you, but- you just-"

Techno gently caught Phil's hands, only holding them long enough for Phil to calm down. "We've got a third traitor," Techno muttered. Phil stared at him, and Techno let out a heavy sigh. "I lost them. But a Jedi jumped me right here, forced me into the Dark Side of my thoughts. I don't know how they did it, but I recognized them. It's someone I know. They've got a silver lightsaber, and-" A memory of a silver lightsaber suddenly flashed through Techno's mind, and he cast Phil a horrified look. "Where's Eret?"

Phil frowned. "No, it's not Eret. He showed up at the courtyard, and he came with me and a few others to try to follow you. Unless he can be in two places at once, it's not him."

Relief flooded Techno's mind. He slumped in on himself, pressing his hands into his eyes. Thank the gods that it wasn't Eret. Techno knew just how powerful the other Jedi Master was.

"Techno, what were you talking about? You said that our third traitor forced you into the Dark Side of your thoughts? What the hell does that mean?"

Even without taking his hands from his face, Techno could perfectly picture Phil's worried expression. Guilt and shame swelled in his chest.

Techno hadn't told Phil. He hadn't told anyone. Ever since escaping from the Dark Side vergence, Techno had felt... vulnerable. Exposed. Without Ra-Lune constantly haunting him, forcing him to keep his shields primed against the Dark Side, darkness had taken over a corner of his mind. It whispered into its ear, telling him of all the things he could do if he only gave in.

In a way, Ra-Lune had been right. Techno did know the taste of anger. He knew how it felt to be scared for his friends; he knew how it felt for rage to completely overtake him.

More than anything, Techno knew that he wasn't a Jedi. He'd believed it as a Knight, but now... he recognized the darkness swirling around his mind, infecting his Force presence. And, somewhere along the line, Techno had infected Phil, too. In saving his partner's life, Techno had condemned him to the same path he walked.

"I'm sorry," Techno mumbled. He didn't even know why he was apologizing now, but the words tumbled from his mouth like they had a life of their own. "I'm so sorry. I shouldn't have- I should have died to Ra-Lune. Everything would be better if-"

A warm glow settled over Techno's mind. His words died in his throat, and slowly, Phil's presence eased the ball of emotions jammed in Techno's heart.

"I don't know what happened," Phil said quietly, and hands gently pulled Techno's away from his face. When he looked up, he found Phil examining him with such fondness that it hurt. "But don't you ever fucking say that you're better off dead," the blond man finished gently. "That traitor messed with your mind, and I won't let them fuck you up like this. Come on. We can't catch up to them now, so we should get back to the Temple. Gods know that someone has to reign Dream in."

A plan of action. Something to keep Techno's mind occupied.

"Isn't that why George is here?" Techno asked blearily. Phil slipped an arm under his shoulders, and Techno allowed his partner to heave him to his feet. "Or Sapnap?"

Phil cast him a dry smile. "You know that they won't be enough. They don't know the pain he's going through."

The rest of that sentence hung in the air, unspoken: *But we do.*

Techno nodded tiredly. Phil began hobbling them out of the alleyway, and Techno made it his silent mission to get himself together as soon as possible. But until his head cleared, all Techno could do was lean on Phil and let his thoughts wander.

Three traitors. Every single one had hidden under their noses for months, if not years. Delphina, a member of the Council, Tubbo, a dearly beloved padawan, and some unknown, powerful Jedi with a silver lightsaber.

Delphina and Tubbo were trouble enough.

Who was the third?

---

Tommy's eyes flew open, and he took a gulping gasp of air. For a second, all he could feel was panic. Where was he? He was lying on his back, with gray stones comprising the ceiling above him and a chill creeping into his arms. Tommy tried to take another breath, but his chest felt tight. All that he could do was cough.

"Tommy? Tommy!"

"Will," Tommy croaked, more on instinct than anything else. His Master suddenly appeared above him, and Tommy almost sighed with relief. "Where are we?" he mumbled. "Wh-what happened? I felt... why does my chest hurt? I can't breathe."

A wry smile crossed Wilbur's face, edged with something dangerous. "You wouldn't believe me if I told you," Wilbur muttered. "Come on. Let's get you up." The sharp tone of his voice made Tommy nervous, but he allowed his Master to press a gentle hand to his back.

Tommy's head spun as soon as he was upright. He hissed and swayed, unwittingly leaning against Wilbur's supporting shoulder. Gods, he could barely think straight. What had happened?

His memories were infuriatingly fuzzy. The last thing he remembered was walking with Wilbur towards the training arena since he and Tubbo had been planning to spend a few hours together. Tommy had been annoyed at Wilbur's determination to accompany them. Still, he'd reluctantly accepted the accusation that he and Tubbo usually got into trouble. Also, Tommy had wanted to keep an eye on Wilbur, lest his Master hurt himself again. And then... and then...

Nothing. It was a blank slate. Tommy wasn't even sure *when* he'd lost consciousness. Had he slipped? Knocked his head on something?

"What happened?" Tommy asked again. He made sure he could support himself, then glanced at his Master. Wilbur watched him with eyes that didn't seem as warm as usual. "Where are we?"

Wilbur hesitated. That was enough to set Tommy's nerves buzzing.

"I don't know," the taller man muttered. "I was knocked out on the way here. I only woke up in time to be thrown in here, which is just a stroke of fucking luck, isn't it? I don't know where we are. I can't feel anything besides you. *And I-*"

Wilbur's voice had risen in pitch throughout his little speech, but he abruptly cut himself off before he could finish his thought. Tommy frowned, worried despite everything. Wilbur's Force presence was chaotic. It roiled like an ocean, splashing everywhere and crashing against itself. If the bags under the taller man's eyes were any indication, Wilbur had been fighting himself for a while.

What had happened?

Asking again didn't seem like the brightest idea. Tommy pulled his gaze from Wilbur's drawn face and cast a look around their prison. It was a small cell, about as big as Wilbur's living room. A ratty cot was latched to the ground nearby, a small basket sitting next to it. Gray stones comprised three walls, but the individual bricks were haphazard, and some protruded at strange angles. It seemed like someone had hurriedly thrown together the wall and called it a day.

Tommy's gaze shifted to the third wall. His heart crawled into his throat.

An electric field extended between the two side walls, pulsing a fierce red. Beyond the field, another cell was visible across the hallway. It was blessedly empty, but traces of crimson were painted across the floor.

Tommy swallowed back the nausea in his throat and decided against thinking about what had happened in the other cells.

Gods, where were they?!

"Will," Tommy blurted before he could stop himself. His Master's eyes flicked up to meet his, and a ball of nervousness crept into Tommy's throat. "I know something is very fucking wrong, and it's really not the best idea to keep me in the dark. Tell me what the fuck happened."

Wilbur was silent for a long, long moment. The hard edge in the taller man's gaze only made Tommy feel more and more nauseous, but he refused to back down. He *needed* to know what was going on.

Finally, Wilbur let out a short breath. "We got kidnapped by the Night Thief," he muttered. Darkness crossed Wilbur's face, and it was so potent that Tommy had to keep himself from recoiling. "He got you with that same needle that took down Phil a few weeks ago," Wilbur continued, almost too quietly for Tommy to hear. "I pulled it out before the poison got in your system, so you should be fine. But it was close. I don't- I don't know what would have happened without the bacta patch."

"What bacta?" Tommy asked dumbly. It was all he could do not to think about what Wilbur had just told- all he could do not to think about the fact that he'd been struck by the same dart that had almost killed Philza.

Wilbur waved at the corner of the cell, and Tommy followed his Master's direction. A dry, used bacta patch sat in the corner, still stained with a little bit of blood. *Is that the bacta patch the doctors gave to him?* Tommy wondered, equal parts confused and grateful. But asking the question aloud again seemed like a poor idea.

Tommy turned his gaze back to his Master. Wilbur had hunched in on himself, dark eyes fixed on a point somewhere outside the field. His Force presence roiled with too many emotions to pick out, and it was then that Tommy realized he couldn't actually *feel* anything. His bond with Wilbur had been completely sealed off.

A twinge of anger flickered through Tommy's mind. What was Wilbur keeping from him? What was so gods-damned important that Wilbur refused to open up their bond and let Tommy feel it, too?

"What the fuck is going on?" Tommy snapped. Wilbur shot him a sharp look, but Tommy ignored the signs of danger written across his Master's face. "You said we were kidnapped by the Night Thief, but that doesn't make any fucking sense. How'd he get in? Why did no one notice us being dragged off by one guy?"

Wilbur's lips pressed together. The spark of anger in Tommy's mind flared into a campfire.

"I don't know how the Night Thief did it," Wilbur said slowly, clearly choosing every word before he said it. "He fucking knocked me out before doing anything, so I don't know--"

Tommy's anger exploded to its boiling point, and he lunged forward, grabbing fistfuls of Wilbur's

shirt and shaking his Master roughly. “What the fuck aren’t you telling me?!” he demanded. His voice cracked, but Tommy didn’t care anymore. Something was horribly wrong, and Wilbur was-  
“Tubbo is a fucking traitor!” Wilbur roared.

Everything froze. Just as quickly as it had appeared, all of Tommy’s anger drained away, leaving him cold and empty. He stared at Wilbur, desperately trying to understand why his Master had chosen *this* moment to play a gods-awful joke. But Wilbur wasn’t lying. His mental shields had receded, and all Tommy could feel was the anger and betrayal and raw agony that dominated his Master’s mind.

Wilbur wasn’t lying. *Wilbur wasn’t lying.*

“The fuck are you talking about?” Tommy croaked. His hands slipped from Wilbur’s shirt, but the taller man didn’t even look up at him. Wilbur’s eyes stayed on the stone floor. “Tubbo- Tubbo isn’t a traitor,” Tommy protested weakly. Even to his own ears, he sounded desperate, and angry tears gathered in his eyes. “He’s not a traitor! How dare you fucking say that!”

Wilbur’s gaze lifted to meet his. “Do you want to read my fucking mind, Tommy? Go ahead. I’m an open book. Look for yourself.”

Something about the apathy and exhaustion in his Master’s voice broke Tommy in a way he’d never thought he could. Suddenly, all he could feel was hatred, and he wanted nothing more than to punch Wilbur in the face. “You’re lying!” Tommy screamed. “Tubbo wouldn’t betray us!”

A spark of anger flickered across Wilbur’s face. “He did, Tommy,” the taller man said coldly. “I didn’t think he’d fucking be a traitor either, but he *is*.”

“No!”

The single word tore itself from Tommy’s throat like it belonged to someone else. Emotions crashed together in Tommy’s head, and he barely bit back a pained noise. Everything was so *loud*. Why did everything hurt?! And Wilbur- why was Wilbur lying to him? His Master didn’t lie to him!

Did- did that mean-

“No!” Tommy shouted again. He backed away from Wilbur, who had again hunched into himself. “You’re fucking lying! You’re- Tubbo wouldn’t do that! He’s my best friend, and I-“

Memories suddenly drifted into Tommy’s head. All the strange moments he’d had with Tubbo over the past month presented themselves in a neat little line, and the sick feeling in Tommy’s chest got stronger and stronger with each new memory.

Tubbo, actively avoiding him and canceling plans at every turn.

Tubbo, closing off and never talking about how he felt, even after so many years of telling each other *everything*.

Tubbo, building his mental shields to perfection without a single explanation as to why.

Tommy’s body began to shake. He stumbled towards the edge of the cell, pressing his hands against the field. It crackled under his touch but didn’t yield in any way. Hot tears streamed down Tommy’s cheeks.



The final nail in the coffin... the parting conversation he'd had with Tubbo before heading into the Underworld to save Dream and Techno.

*"You could come with us. We've got the space."*

*"I can't go with you. I- I would only slow you down, and I really don't think that you-"*

*"Hey, hey, calm down. It's okay. You don't have to go. I just thought that you might want to."*

*"Okay. Okay, good. Thank you."*

*"Yeah. Of course."*

Tommy squeezed his eyes shut, but he couldn't stop the tears or control the shivers wracking his body. It made sense. Tubbo had been so off lately, and...

Gods. Tubbo was a traitor. He'd used everyone's trust in them to sell them out and break the Order from the inside. How much had Tubbo told Aries? How much had Tubbo spilled about everyone and their weaknesses? More than that, Tubbo was a technological whiz, and Tommy had witnessed him break encryptions that shouldn't have had the capability to be broken.

And Tubbo was a traitor.

Tommy's anger evaporated. The emotions keeping him on his feet abandoned him, and he collapsed to his knees, trying to stifle the sobs pressing at his throat. "Tubbo," he whispered. "What did you do?"

Arms suddenly wrapped around Tommy's shoulders. He tried to throw them off, but Wilbur held on tight, kneeling next to Tommy. Eventually, Tommy didn't even see the point of resisting. He sank into Wilbur's hold and closed his eyes, still barely keeping the tears at bay.

"I'm sorry," Wilbur whispered. Their bond was wide open once again, and this time, Tommy could feel the grief staining his Master's mind. "I didn't want to believe it, either," Wilbur continued, barely loud enough for Tommy to hear. "I shouldn't have taken it out on you. Do you want to see what happened?"

Tommy hated hearing Wilbur sound so vulnerable. It always meant that things would fucking hurt, usually in ways that would haunt him for months. But... Tommy and Wilbur were stuck in a prison cell with no way to contact anyone. Tommy couldn't even feel any Force presences beyond Wilbur's. What did he have left to lose?

"Yeah," Tommy rasped. "S-show me."

Wilbur was silent for a moment. Then memories began drifting over their bond. Tommy accepted them without complaint, and slowly, the bits and pieces formed a complete memory. When Tommy opened his eyes, he found himself looking down at his own still body, a bacta patch slapped on his neck.

*I look terrible,* Tommy thought dully.

*"Wilbur! Tommy!"*

The body Tommy inhabited (Wilbur in the past) whipped around to face the voice, and Tommy's heart cracked as Tubbo raced into sight. The other boy sprinted over to him, then dropped to his knees, looking between Tommy's body and past Wilbur's face.

*“What are you doing here?”* Tubbo demanded. *“You’re not supposed to fucking be here!”*

The choice of words made Tommy’s stomach flip. The memory suddenly sped up, and the world blurred together into a kaleidoscope of colors. The change came from Wilbur’s intervention as he censored his own memory. But Tommy didn’t care. He didn’t want to see everything.

When the memory slowed, a new man had entered the picture. He was short, wearing an oversized sweater and loose pants – the Night Thief. Tommy recognized him from the pictures Dream and George had brought back with them.

*“Hey, Tubbo!”* the man laughed. *“These are the two bitches, huh?”*

Tommy shifted his gaze to Tubbo, who was hunched next to a fourth man. With a sick jolt, Tommy realized that the fourth man, a Falleen, stared at the sky with blank eyes, a blaster hole burned in his temple.

The memory sped up again. Tommy didn’t complain.

*“These are the two, right?”* The Night Thief said, gesturing vaguely at past Wilbur. *“The fucking Master and Padawan, yeah? The weak links of the Sleepy Boys?”*

A faint spark of anger burned to life in Tommy’s chest at being called the “weak links.” But it faded as Tubbo glanced at past Wilbur. The other boy’s gaze was dull, and his face was pale. He looked like a walking ghost.

*“Yeah,”* Tubbo mumbled. *“It’s them.”*

The courtyard fizzled away, and even though Tommy knew there had to be more to what had happened, he couldn’t find it in himself to see more. He blinked and found himself back in the prison cell, clutching one of Wilbur’s arms like it was his only anchor.

*“Is he okay?”* Tommy whispered. The tears were getting harder to repress, and he bit down on his lip. *“Is Tubbo okay?”*

Wilbur held him tighter. *“I don’t know,”* he murmured.

And that was the straw that broke what little hope Tommy had left. His body was consumed by shakes, and he pressed his face into Wilbur’s shoulder, tears staining his cheeks. Tommy was vaguely aware of Wilbur stroking his hair, but he didn’t have the breath to say anything.

Tubbo was a traitor. He’d turned Tommy and Wilbur over to the Night Thief, a known associate of Aries, which meant that they were probably being held by Aries. Tommy couldn’t reach out to the Force, Wilbur’s shin had bled through his pants leg again without its bacta patch, and Tubbo was gone. Just... gone.

Tommy and Wilbur were probably going to die wherever they were, completely alone.

*“Why?”* Tommy whispered aloud. *“Why’d he do it? Where is he?”*

Grief washed through their bond, and Tommy couldn’t tell if it had come from him or Wilbur. Maybe it was both of them. *“I don’t know, Tommy,”* Wilbur murmured back. *“I don’t know.”*

Wilbur didn’t even tell him that they would be okay.

He always did.

“Tubbo!” Tommy screamed. He pulled his face from Wilbur’s shoulder and stared desperately out at the empty hallway. He was shaking too badly to even sit up by himself, and he felt the tears streaming down his face. But Tommy didn’t care anymore.

“*Tubbo!*” he cried. “*Tubbo, where are you?!*”

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Tubbo hated the factory. He hated everything about it, from its grease-stained pipes to the metallic floors to the electricity flowing through the tubes above the hallways. Compared to the rest of Coruscant, especially the Jedi Temple, the factory looked ugly.

It was, by far, Tubbo’s least favorite of all the places Quackity had taken him.

It was a longer list than Tubbo wanted to admit. The vendor's stall in the black market district and the coffeeshop in the uptown district had been two of many. The rest had been tucked away in the very corners of Coruscant, places where light couldn’t touch him, and all traces of the Jedi Temple had disappeared. Tubbo had always assumed that had been the point. No one could know that he was gone.

No one could know. No one could know.

But now, people did know. Wilbur had seen him, and Wilbur had stared at him with pure hatred. Wilbur had seen what he was.

So had Val. But Val was dead. Val had gotten in the way, and now, he’d never help another patient. He’d never help that little girl he’d taken such a liking to, and he’d never be able to propose to that man he’d told Tubbo about.

And Tommy was... was Tommy still alive? Tubbo hadn’t asked to see him and Wilbur because what was the point? They both probably hated him.

Everyone would.

Tubbo had felt the explosion of Force power that Wilbur had released right before Quackity had hit him over the head. Quackity clearly hadn’t noticed a thing, and Tubbo had deigned to mention it. Maybe some small part of himself wanted to be found. Some part of himself wanted the Jedi to follow him and Quackity.

Tubbo would probably be thrown in jail. At the very least, he’d be exiled from the Order, just like George had been. But that wouldn’t be so bad, would it? At least... at least his friends would be a little bit safer.

But Tubbo knew not to get his hopes up. Even with Techno’s exceptional Force sensitivity, there was no way that the pig Jedi would be able to follow them with the shields. Tubbo had always hated the shields, too. They cut everyone inside off from the Force, and Tubbo felt like he was missing limbs when he couldn’t connect to the Force. But Aries had said the shields were necessary, and-

“Hey, Tubbo.”

Tubbo flinched, and he hurriedly refocused on the present. Quackity stood in the doorway, watching him curiously.

“You doing alright?” the man asked. “You look kinda pale.”

*Don't let it show. Pull your shoulders back, hide everything away. No one can know.*

Tubbo slipped into his second persona as if he was putting on a coat, and he felt a blank slate fall over his face. It made him a little sick to realize how comfortable he was in his fake skin. "I'm fine," he said dully. At one point, he'd been nervous that Quackity would recognize how weak his front was. Instead, the man had seemed thrilled that Tubbo was so obedient. "What is it?"

Quackity jerked his head over his shoulder. "Big boss just showed up. Wants to talk to you."

Panic stabbed through Tubbo's heart and left him bleeding, but he kept his mask intact. "Aries wants to see me?" he repeated, silently praying that Quackity was just messing with him.

But, to Tubbo's horror, the thief nodded. "Yeah, big man," Quackity said brightly. Tubbo barely stifled a flinch at the nickname. "You're the man of the hour, you know? And you've got the new info, and Aries wants it firsthand."

Nausea roiled in Tubbo's stomach. For one horrible moment, he thought he was going to throw up and expose himself. Then the feeling vanished, swept away by the face he'd worn for the past three weeks.

*No one can know.*

"Okay," Tubbo said because he knew that was what Quackity wanted to hear. "Am I going to stay here tonight?"

Quackity shrugged a little. "I dunno. You'll do whatever the boss fucking tells you to do."

Tubbo inclined his head once, just enough to count as a nod. Then he carefully slid from the uncomfortable chair. Quackity had dropped him off in the abandoned factory's only break room upon their arrival, and Tubbo had spent the past half an hour anxiously pacing. Now, he would give anything just to stay inside.

"Don't look so nervous," Quackity laughed, clapping Tubbo on the shoulder as he slipped out the door. "Aries isn't all that scary once you get to know him. Sure, he might cut off your ear if you don't do what he wants, but that's just the way of the Underworld."

*I want to keep my ears,* Tubbo thought hysterically. But none of the emotions he felt showed on his face. Everything was contained; everything was hidden away. "I'll be polite," Tubbo droned aloud. "He won't have to cut off my ear."

Quackity laughed again, slinging an arm around Tubbo's shoulders. "See, that's why I like you!" the man said, dark eyes sparkling with mirth. "You *get* it! I don't have to teach you any uncomfortable lessons, you know?"

The weight of Quackity's arm around his shoulders made Tubbo feel sick. But he nodded.

*No one can know.*

Once Quackity's laughter finally died down, the man led Tubbo down the stairs. Beyond the stairs, the gigantic main floor stretched like a deadly field. All the machinery had been cleared away, leaving only the giant vents (which emitted puffs of searingly hot air, thanks to the lava below) and a few meager walkways. Quackity navigated the walkways with ease. Tubbo flinched every time a jet of air gushed from one of the vents.

Tubbo had learned the hard way just how hot the vents were. He'd accidentally burnt his arm

during his first trip, and he'd had to come up with a ridiculous excuse about his lightsaber to excuse it. Quackity had mocked him for that event for several days afterward.

Tubbo's gaze flicked to Quackity. The man strolled along ahead of him, hands swinging loosely as he hummed some Underworld tune.

The vents were covered by huge grates, but Tubbo knew how to use the machine that recovered them ("Just in case," Quackity had said, giving him a conspiratorial wink). It would be so easy to run over to the machine, lift a grate, and push Quackity into the lava with the Force. The thief wasn't Force-sensitive, after all. It would be so easy...

*No!* Tubbo thought desperately. His mask cracked for just a moment, and he slammed his palms against his temples. *I won't kill him! That's wrong!*

But even as wrong as it was, the thought was like a light at the end of the tunnel. If Tubbo killed Quackity, then Aries would either kill Tubbo or stop attacking the Temple until he found another right-hand man.

Either way... Tubbo would be out of this nightmare. No more pretending. No more lies.

But then, he would be dead. And Tubbo didn't really want to die, either.

*You killed Val without hesitation,* a nasty little voice in the back of Tubbo's head sneered. It sounded just like Quackity. *And I bet you'd do it to any of your other "friends."*

*I didn't kill Val!* Tubbo protested. But deep in his heart, he knew that wasn't true. If he'd only gotten Val out of there a little bit quicker, if only he'd kept track of the time while talking to Dream!

Dream. Gods. Tubbo had taken Dream's trust and abused it for so long. If ever his Master found out about what he'd done, Tubbo knew that Dream would exile him personally. One of Dream's most prized traits was loyalty, which was why he'd been so heartbroken when George had seemingly crossed him.

What mercy would Dream have on Tubbo, who had turned against the Jedi Order?

"Hey, Tubbo! Keep up!"

Tubbo again broke out of his thoughts, and he found Quackity waiting on the other side of the main floor, one hand planted loosely on his hip.

"Sorry," Tubbo called, picking up his pace ever so slightly. "I didn't get a lot of sleep last night. I was trying to make sure that no one would be using the training arena at the same time as us."

Quackity nodded sagely. "That's good," he said, eyes gleaming with approval. "That kinda forward-thinking is what's gonna put you in good standing with the boss. He likes people who think for themselves, y'know? Makes his job easier. Maybe you could take over one of his Underworld branches someday."

Bile choked Tubbo at the thought. But he nodded like he was supposed to and headed up the stairs that Quackity waved him towards. The raised walkway around the main floor connected both sides of the factory, but Quackity always seemed to prefer taking the main floor itself. Tubbo had a sneaking suspicion that the thief did it as a control type of thing. So long as Quackity was around, Tubbo had to stay on his toes.

It didn't matter. It was true. So long as Quackity was around, Tubbo wouldn't be free.

Tubbo cast a brief glance at the machine that raised the grates. It would be so easy.

*No!*

"This way," Quackity called, interrupting Tubbo's thoughts yet again. The thief was striding towards the stairs that led up to the executive office. Blacked-out glass gleamed in the office windows, and fear crept into Tubbo's chest, tightening around his heart.

He was finally meeting Aries. After weeks of being ordered around by the man, they were going to see each other face to face.

*No one can know. No one can know.*

Tubbo pulled his shoulders back and followed Quackity up the last flight of stairs. Each creak of metal made his stomach flip and his head spin, but Tubbo ignored the feelings. He tucked everything except his persona into a mental box and hid it away. Right now, he wasn't Tubbo. He was just a kid who had gotten roped into the Underworld.

Was that Tubbo's way of trying to separate himself from the horrible things he'd done? Maybe. But if it kept him sane... he was willing to pretend he wasn't his actions.

Even though he was. Even though he'd told Delphina where to plant the last bomb, knowing that if the Eastern Wing couldn't be evacuated in time, padawans would die. Tubbo's justification had been that the Order always moved faster when padawans' lives were at stake, and technically, he knew that was true (and had been the only thing to save them all).

But he'd still told Delphina where to plant the bomb.

He'd still hacked the task force databases and found out everything that they knew about Aries.

Tubbo had done everything in his power to keep his friends from winning.

Quackity reached the top stair and hung a tight left, strolling towards an elaborate, steel door. Tubbo trailed him mutely. The thief rapped sharply three times, then began bouncing on the balls of his feet like an excited kid. Quackity's enthusiasm only made Tubbo feel more and more ill.

"Come in."

Tubbo's feet froze to the ground. That was the first time he'd ever heard Aries' voice. It was deeper than he'd expected, edged with a slight rasp.

Then Quackity grabbed the door handle, and Tubbo's heart shot into his throat. Oh, gods, he wasn't ready! He wanted to go home! He'd rather be in the cell with Tommy and Wilbur, facing their ire, than meeting Aries!

The door swung open on silent hinges. All of Tubbo's emotions disappeared as the office was revealed, replaced by numb horror.

The executive office was nicer than he'd always expected it to be. It was made of polished metal, cleaner than everything else in the factory by a large degree. Red carpet covered the floor, and a magnificent mahogany desk sat in the middle of the room. Behind the desk sat Aries, facing away from the door.

Tubbo tried to breathe. It didn't work. His lungs refused to move, and his heart refused to circulate air.

"I've got Tubbo!" Quackity crowed, and his loud voice seemed to echo around the office. He bounced over to the desk, hopping onto the edge of it and leaning backward to face Aries. "He's all yours."

A low chuckle filled the air. Tubbo's blood went cold at the sound, and suddenly, he found himself shaking. *Stop it*, he ordered frantically, trying to reach out to the Force to steady himself. But that was right; he'd closed himself off from the Force so Dream wouldn't feel his emotions. Tubbo was alone with Aries.

"Close the door, kid."

That same deep voice carried the authority of someone who'd never been disobeyed in their lives. Tubbo's body moved before his brain even caught up, and he closed the door quietly, sparing up a moment to examine the various locks. Could he escape if he had to?

"Turn around. I wanna see our little rat."

Slowly, ever so slowly, Tubbo turned.

Aries looked just like he sounded. He watched Tubbo with dark, almost black eyes, and they glittered with dangerous intelligence. Brown hair was neatly combed back over twin rams' horns, and tan skin was hidden by a pressed, gray suit.

"It's good to meet you, Tubbo," Aries drawled, and a dazzling grin spread over his face. "I've heard a lot about you from Quackity here. Lots of good things. You were our turning point, huh? The key to toppling the Jedi Order from the inside."

All of Tubbo's words stuck in his throat. He wanted to be polite, to say *anything that would get him out of this room as fast as possible*, but nothing was coming to mind. All he could do was stare at Aries.

The Order's hidden enemy. The man everyone was searching so desperately for, and he sat in front of Tubbo like a charismatic boss and his up-and-coming employee.

Aries swiveled his chair around, waving at the empty space in front of his desk. "Don't be so shy," the man said, never losing that hypnotic smile. "This is the first time we've ever spoken, face to face. I learn a lot about someone from their eyes, you see. I've never seen your eyes before."

*Oh, fuck*, Tubbo thought hysterically, and it took all the self-control he had to keep from visibly shaking. *He'll know*.

But Tubbo didn't have a choice. He was the good, little spy that Quackity had told Aries so much about, and he was obedient to a fault. So Tubbo forced his feet to move one at a time, shuffling himself closer to Aries and Quackity.

Aries watched him passively as he approached, though his gaze hadn't lost the dangerous flicker that Tubbo had immediately noticed. "Tell me, kid," Aries said slowly, interlacing his fingers. "How'd we get you? You seem like a good kid, one that follows the rules. How did my dear Quackity manage to rope you in on this? Did the Jedi fuck you over? Were their promises of glitter and gold not everything you hoped for?"

Words tumbled from Tubbo's mouth before he could stop them. "No, sir," he said dully. "I was

reached out to during a coma, and when I woke up, Quackity contacted me with a holocom left in my dresser. Since then, Quackity had made threats against my Master and my friends.”

“Oh!” Aries exclaimed, and a delighted smile crossed his face. “That sounds like something he’d do. Ah, well, not all the good candidates are willing ones. It’s a shame, really.”

Aries' smile seemed real. But Quackity's had, too, and Tubbo was starting to realize that neither of the men before him was genuine. They had perfected their charismatic fronts, just like Tubbo had with his weak persona, and gods only knew what they hid underneath.

“Well, that made things awkward,” Aries mused. “Alright, enough of the chatter. Tell me what you got from the last task force meeting.”

Fear flared to life in Tubbo’s chest as Aries’ piercing gaze fixed on him. This was the man he’d been turning information over to for weeks. This was the man who had orchestrated every hellish thing the Temple had undergone, and looking at him, Tubbo understood *how*. Aries terrified him.

*No one can know.*

And Tubbo had to survive.

“Quackity picked me up before I could get the contents of the last task force meeting,” Tubbo droned. Aries narrowed his eyes ever so slightly, but Tubbo kept his blank face on and met the boss’ gaze passively. “But I spoke to my Master, Dream, today. He’s the new leader of the task force. You’re a ghost in the Jedi systems. They don’t even have a good picture of you. Their working theories are that you want something of theirs, and they’re trying to figure out what that is.”

Aries let out a deep belly laugh, and the sound seemed genuine. Tubbo wanted to relax, but he knew better.

“Those fucking idiots!” Aries said, still laughing. “They think *I* want something *they* have? Oh... you Jedi are as stupid as I always thought you were. Alright, that’s enough for today, Tubbo. I’m going to be sticking around here for a while, so...” Aries’ eyes flashed. “We’ll see each other again.”

“Yes, sir,” Tubbo croaked, praying that his voice didn’t betray his fear.

Aries flapped a dismissive hand at him. “None of that 'sir' shit,” the man chided. “‘Sir’ is for big-time bosses and fucking royals who think they’re the big shit. Just call me ‘Schlatt.’ All my friends do. We’re friends, right, Tubbo?”

Tubbo knew better than to even consider disobeying Aries. “Yes, Schlatt.”

“Good. You’re sharp, kid.”

Quackity suddenly snickered, leaning back to face Schlatt once again. “I told you he’s a good one,” the thief whispered, a lop-sided smile spreading across his face.

Schlatt’s mouth twitched in the first real smile Tubbo had seen from him. “Yeah, you did good,” he murmured. He pressed a thumb to the corner of Quackity’s mouth, then gently pushed the thief off his desk. “Take the kid back to his room. I’ve got other business to attend to.”

“You got it, boss!” Quackity chirped, striding across the room to Tubbo and grabbing his arm.



The thief's light touch felt like a hot brand, but Tubbo stuffed down all the emotions building in his chest and stood placidly as Quackity opened the door and dragged them both through. Once the office door shut behind them, Tubbo's knees started to knock. But he couldn't let anything show. Not yet. Not with Quackity still around.

"That was a good first meeting, big man!"

A hand slapped Tubbo's back, and he nearly threw up.

"Schlatt doesn't usually like new hires so much!" Quackity continued cheerfully. He guided Tubbo down the raised walkway, which Tubbo was silently grateful for. "I can tell when he doesn't like people, and you- he likes you. A *lot*. If you're lucky, he might start trusting you with more important stuff."

"Great," Tubbo mumbled.

Quackity laughed loudly and turned away from him, and Tubbo finally let the shivers wrack his body. He felt sick to his stomach. All he wanted to do was curl into himself and go to sleep, but he couldn't even do that much yet. He had to keep his mask on until Quackity was gone.

*Just a few more steps*, Tubbo told himself, choking back exhausted tears. *Just a few more minutes*.

Each step blended together. Tubbo was vaguely aware of Quackity leading him off the main floor and into the winding side hallways, but he couldn't focus. All he could see was a kaleidoscopic mess of colors, an abstract painting formed by his ragged mind.

Then, after several minutes of silent walking, a voice pierced the air.

"*Tubbo!*"

Tubbo froze mid-step. *Tommy?* he thought, bewildered and horrified at the same time.

"*Tubbo! Tubbo, where are you?!*"

The high-pitched scream and broken voice were all too familiar. The shivers wracking Tubbo's body got even worse, and he barely managed to cling to his blank mask. Gods, what was happening to his best friend?

Quackity suddenly spun on his heel, shooting Tubbo a proud grin. "You hear that?" the thief chuckled. Tubbo wished he couldn't. "That's the sound of a man losing his faith. That's the first lesson of being part of the Underworld, Tubbo. Cut all connections before you go aware, or you'll end up with-" Quackity cast a sympathetic look in the vague direction of Tommy's voice. "Casualties."

Tubbo genuinely didn't think he could stay on his feet any longer.

By some divine miracle, Tubbo made it to his room. He ignored Quackity's cheerful farewell, ignored the slam of the iron door. He stared down at the green carpet tossed across the small room's floor.

*Green*, Tubbo thought dumbly. *Like Dream's robes*.

He broke.

All of Tubbo's emotions came tumbling out of its box, and suddenly, Tubbo was sobbing,

collapsed on his knees with his face pressed into the carpet. His sobs turned into screams, and soon, Tubbo's throat was raw from shouting. He was shaking, he knew, but he *just couldn't stop it*.

*I want to go home*, Tubbo pleaded, the only coherent thought in a sea of raging emotions.

But he didn't have a home. He'd chosen to throw that home away because he had been fucking too weak to tell someone that he'd been threatened. He'd been too fucking weak to tell his friends that Quackity had emerged from the shadows one day and said that if he didn't comply, everyone would die.

Why hadn't he just been stronger? Why hadn't he had any sort of spine?!

The image of the lava vents drifted through Tubbo's head. *Either me or Quackity*, he thought hysterically, clenching fistfuls of the carpet. *I don't care anymore. One of us has to go.*

But now, after meeting Aries... Tubbo knew that if he killed Quackity, Aries wouldn't hesitate to do the same to him. Either way, he was facing death.

Tubbo sobbed harder. He just wanted to go home and be with his friends again.

Be with Dream again.

In that moment, Tubbo finally broke the promise he'd made to himself all those weeks ago. Tubbo threw "No one can know" out the window, and he straightened, dropping all of his mental shields. He reached for Dream's Force presence with desperate hands, and through the tattered remains of their bond, Tubbo found his Master.

"Dream!" Tubbo screamed, almost choking on his own tears. "Dream, save me!"

## Chapter End Notes

You know, reading this chapter... I really think I woke up and chose violence today. It's a bit concerning, but it was also so, so fun to write.

Thank you so much for reading and for your extended patience! If you are so inclined, please leave a comment and let me know what you thought! It is always such a pleasure to see your comments, and now that I'm back in the swing of things, I'll be responding again!

I can't promise a consistent posting schedule, as I have a short side project that I want to finish so I can start posting it. But suffice to say that I won't disappear on you for another month lol. Inferno in the Sky is back, my friends, and I am raring to go!

Have a wonderful week, and I'll see y'all again soon!

## Bleeding Judas, Part 3

### Chapter Notes

Welcome back to Inferno in the Sky, my friends. Forgive me if my style has changed a little; it's been a long couple of months lol. But, without any further preamble, I offer the next chapter!

TW for semi-graphic violence + death ideation. Always read safely!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

*Stay calm, Antfrost told himself, taking a deep, shuddering breath. Stay calm. No one knows it's you. Just get through this meeting, and you're home free. After this meeting, the Jedi are going to be in shambles. Just breathe and relax.*

“The Jedi.” As if Antfrost wasn't a Jedi himself. In all but allegiance, he still was. He wore ice blue robes that matched his eyes, carried a lightsaber on his belt, and the Force bubbled cheerfully at his fingertips, awaiting his commands. Everyone else currently assembled in the task force headquarters thought he was a Jedi. In fact, the Council had even nominated him for higher recognition a few months back. Thanks to his score of successful off-planet missions, Antfrost had been on track to becoming the Jedi Order's first “special unit.”

How ironic. The communicator Schlatt had provided still sat in Antfrost's back pocket, and sweat still soaked the small of his back due to his hurried run. In the course of one afternoon, he'd escorted Quackity, Wilbur, and Tommy back to the factory, frantically dealt with Technoblade, met with Schlatt, then run all the back to the Temple. He was exhausted.

At first, working with Schlatt had been the answer to all of Antfrost's prayers. Now, he just felt nauseous. Every Jedi in the room was pale, and bouncing knees or fiddling fingers revealed the collective nervousness of the task force.

*I caused this, Antfrost thought blankly. Once, the thought would have made him grin wildly. I kidnapped three of my friends and made this happen.*

Technically, Antfrost hadn't done the actual kidnapping – he'd stood guard as Quackity had tranquilized Tommy, knocked Wilbur over the head, and collected Tubbo. Then, after he'd dealt a horrible blow to Techno's mental state, he'd placed elaborate shields around the fleeing group so that Wilbur and Tommy couldn't be tracked. When Master and Padawan woke up, they'd have no idea that Antfrost had been involved.

No one ever would know.

Everyone important was at this meeting. Technoblade and Philza stood across from him, shoulder to shoulder, eyes hard. George and Bad (who had been invited to calm the inevitable shitstorm) both wore deep frowns, and their arms were crossed. Half the Council was in attendance as well, with Rhodys looking on worriedly and Eret scanning the room much like Antfrost was.

Eret. Antfrost paused his observations just long enough to smile wryly. Eret had been his saving grace since the beginning. The former padawan of a wild-card master, blind without the Force and

tight-lipped about his true motives. Even if Antfrost made a mistake and accidentally let his Force presence show, everyone would point the finger at Eret. They both had silver lightsabers, and they both had silver auras.

And they were both talented Jedi. Antfrost's off-planet missions had opened his mind to all the things that the Force could do, from forcing someone into their darkest thoughts and reaching out through comas. They weren't even Dark Side abilities – just the inherent power of the Force.

The doors to the task force room suddenly burst open, torn from their hinges by a powerful Force blast. A collective gasp lifted from the assembled Jedi, and Antfrost shrunk further into the shadows. Heavy footsteps tapped into the room, and within moments, Dream stood before them.

The other Jedi Master was a formidable sight. Antfrost had known Dream for years, but never had he seen the taller man's Force presence so ablaze. Anger, hatred, and fear swirled around Dream like he was the eye of an emotional hurricane, and his knuckles were white.

Not the first time, Antfrost felt a touch of fear prick his heart. Dream would kill him if he ever found out. He would do it without hesitation, before Antfrost could explain *why* he'd betrayed the Order. It was a terrifying prospect. Then again, if Antfrost had turned on the Order, why wouldn't Dream strike him down? It was an even trade.

The balanced nature of the Force.

Dream inhaled deeply, and Antfrost suddenly remembered that it wasn't the time to be lost in thought. He snapped back to attention just in time to see Dream slam his hands on the center table.

“What the *fuck* happened?” the Jedi Master roared.

The room was silent.

“No one?” Dream barked. He straightened, and even with his mask on, Antfrost knew that his old friend was scanning the room, scrutinizing the other Jedi. “No one can tell me why my fucking padawan is missing, along with Wilbur and Tommy? No one can tell me why all of them are gone, and a nurse is *dead*? No one?!”

Again, the room was silent. Antfrost logged each reaction carefully, searching for any telltale signs that might expose him. No such worries; everyone in the room looked clueless and petrified.

No. Not everyone. Eret's brow was furrowed, and his lips moved silently as he stared at the ground. Techno and Philza were also looking at each other, their auras burning brightly (a clear signal that they were conversing via their bond).

Eret wasn't a concern. Antfrost hadn't spoken to the other Jedi Master in months, and the one occasion that Eret has caught him leaving the Temple had been a sideswipe of an encounter at best. But Philza and Techno... they were a hazard. Both were wickedly sharp and incredibly powerful. If they'd figured it out, or worse, if Techno had somehow recognized Antfrost's voice-

*Stop!* Antfrost commanded himself, barely keeping from slapping himself across the face. *I am fine! I just have to get through this meeting, then I can get out of here!*

His stern reassurances didn't assuage the nerves coiling around his stomach.

Philza's head suddenly lifted, and he stepped forward from the ring that had been formed around Dream. “Dream, we don't know what happened,” he said gently, holding out a placating hand. “That's why we're-”

“You know damn well what happened, Philza!” Dream spat, and several people in the room murmured in surprise. “You were there!” Dream continued, his voice laced with venom. “You and Techno were there, and you let them go! Don't even try to tell me that you don't know what happened!”

Philza's gaze hardened. “Mate, if you wanna blame someone, blame whoever's cutting our legs out from us,” he said coldly. “I didn't see you out there with us. Techno's the only reason we know they were kidnapped in the first place.”

Again, fear wrapped tight strands around Antfrost's lungs. Philza and Techno knew something; they had to. There was no other reason for Philza to speak out.

Dream and Philza stared at each other for a few seconds. Finally, Dream's fists unclenched. His entire body began to shake, and Philza sighed heavily, wrapping an arm around the taller man's shoulders. Philza said something that Antfrost couldn't hear, but the effect was clear: “*It's okay.*”

Tears pricked at Antfrost's eyes. He hurriedly swiped them away, but the void in his chest tore a few more chunks out of his already weakened resolve. He'd done this. He'd started them all down this path.

None of this had been Antfrost's plan. The attacks shouldn't have brought George back to the Temple, Philza shouldn't have lost an arm, and most importantly, Tubbo shouldn't have gotten dragged into this mess. Tubbo was a good kid, and when Schlatt had ordered his recruitment, Antfrost had wrestled with himself for days before caving.

Because that was what always happened. Antfrost had known of Aries's reputation before getting involved with the mob boss, but not until he had become an employee had he realized the full extent of Schlatt's charisma and danger. Deals with Aries were made for life.

“Alright!” Rhodys shouted, breaking Antfrost from his thoughts once again. The Trandosha's voice carried over the stunned crowd, and Philza nodded once, dragging Dream backward. Bad and George quickly hurried over to the pair. “In case you somehow missed it, Master Wilbur and Padawans Tommy and Tubbo have been kidnapped. Their kidnapper also left a body: Vesval Nok'tara, a Falleen nurse. We are working under the assumption that Aries is responsible for this. Let's review.”

The assembled Jedi, except for Philza and Dream, shuffled forward obediently, and Antfrost smiled faintly. Rhodys was a good Jedi, and they clearly had a talent for leadership. They would serve the Council well.

Not that there would be a Council to serve for much longer – or an Order, for that matter.

A shiver suddenly crawled up Antfrost's spine, and he instinctively glanced around. His gaze immediately landed on Technoblade. The pig Jedi was openly staring at him, blood-red eyes narrowed into slits. As soon as Antfrost met his gaze, Techno glanced pointedly at the lightsaber hanging from Antfrost's belt.

*Oh, fuck,* Antfrost thought hysterically. *He knows. He knows it's me.*

But he didn't show any of his panic. He stuffed down his growing hysteria, as had become so commonplace for him, and dropped a completely blank mask over his face. He stared right back at Technoblade, silently challenging the pig Jedi to speak against him. That was the very last thing Antfrost wanted, of course, but he couldn't show fear. Not in front of Aries, not in front of the Jedi.

After a painfully long moment, Techno's gaze shifted away. Antfrost very nearly wilted from relief, but he rejected the brief reprieve. He refused to let himself feel anything, and after the situation was over, he dealt with his emotions in highly unhealthy ways. Refusing to acknowledge his feelings probably couldn't even be classified as dealing with them.

Antfrost spent the next half an hour in mute terror. The task force struggled to form a cohesive plan, and eventually, they turned to potential traitors in hopes it might provide clues. Antfrost's name was never once mentioned. It was both a relief and a punch to the gut. His betrayal had only succeeded because no one saw him. No one knew he existed unless he made himself known.

No one except for Dream, George, Sapnap, and Bad. They were his friends. They saw him.

*And how did you return the favor?* a voice that sounded horrifyingly like Schlatt's drawled. *You turned around and stabbed 'em in the back.*

*I had to*, Antfrost protested. But, after so many sleepless nights, the excuse didn't sound as compelling as it once had.

Someone clapped sharply, and Antfrost glanced up. From his perch in the corner of the room, tucked away in the shadows, he had a vantage point of the whole task force. Dream once again stood by the center table, head tilted towards the files circling the hologram.

"Okay," the Jedi Master said slowly. He still sounded shaky, but a firm edge laced his voice. "Here's what we know. Underworld records link a bunch of shady deals to Aries. The anonymous people who attacked the Temple during the Second Temple Siege are probably a group of anti-Jedi mercenaries, which we've learned are--"

Dream suddenly stiffened, going stock still. Concern touched Antfrost's heart, and he repressed the urge to drop to the ground and check on his friend.

"Dream?" George asked, gently touching the taller man's arm. Dream didn't respond, and even from the other side of the room, Antfrost saw George frown. "Dream, what's--"

Dream unfroze with an explosive gasp, and he all but collapsed onto the table. "I heard him," the Jedi Master rasped, and desperation blatantly colored his voice. "I heard Tubbo. I heard him; I know where he is! He's- he's being held somewhere, somewhere in the black market district. It was- a factory! He's being kept in a factory! Rhodys, pull up any deals that Aries has made with manufacturing plants!"

Antfrost's brain went completely blank. His thoughts dissolved into white static, and for the briefest of moments, something like relief warmed his chest.

*It's over*, he thought dreamily. *The factory doesn't have any guards. The task force will find Wilbur, Tommy, and Tubbo, and Tubbo will tell them about me. I don't have to pretend anymore.*

For exactly six seconds, Antfrost gladly accepted his seemingly imminent future of discovery and exile. Then his brain exploded back to life, and panic was all Antfrost knew.

The task force couldn't find the factory! If they did, everything would be over! Everything Antfrost had worked for, everything he had *planned*, would be lost! Everything would go back to just the way they were, and Aries would sink back into the Underworld!

Antfrost frantically scanned the faces of the other Jedi. They were all crowded around Dream, and even Technoblade was watching Dream with mild concern. Antfrost checked once more, then leaped towards the hidden safety hatch that led out of the building. He easily caught the bottom

rung and swung himself into the one-man tunnel, hurriedly launching himself upwards. When he reached the top, it was a simple matter for Antfrost to silently remove the metal panel and clamber into the sunlight.

He had to get to the factory. He *had* to get to the factory.

That was the mantra Antfrost recited as he leaped from rooftop to rooftop, escaping the Temple within a matter of minutes. That was the mantra he recited as he dashed down crowded streets, his heart aching as he heard the chatter from a hundred happy people.

*What if we just let this happen?* the weary part of Antfrost's conscious wondered. *It's a miracle we made it this far. Someone has died because of us, and gods know Tubbo is never going to be the same. We should stop before more people die.*

*No!* the panicked part of Antfrost's conscious screamed in response. *We are so close! We have to see this through! We have to!*

Antfrost shuddered as a series of memories flashed through his head, playing pieces of a tragedy that unfolded over months – years, even. He saw George's crying face, Dream sitting alone in his room, nursing horrific scars on every part of his body, and Sapnap, training until his knuckles bled and screaming at the sky.

But even as Antfrost tucked his memories back where they belonged, he couldn't deny that he sounded obsessed. Had his motivation changed somewhere along the way? Was Antfrost still doing this to get revenge, or was he only determined to follow through to prove to himself that he wasn't as invisible as everyone thought he was?

He swallowed thickly and kept running.

Fifteen minutes later, Antfrost arrived at the factory. It was a monstrous building, made of rusted iron and blackmetal that shone like obsidian underneath the midday sun. There was something distinctly malicious about its hulking form. But Antfrost paid no mind to the hairs prickling on the back of his neck and strode up to the factory's gigantic rolling doors. He glanced at the scanner winking at him from the rafters (both to shut off the laser cannons that would fire on any unfamiliar faces and to show Schlatt that he'd returned). Once the light flashed green, Antfrost raised the rolling door via the Force and stepped inside.

The grease and oil of the factory were starting to become old friends. Antfrost ignored the grime coating his feet as he wove through the labyrinthine corridors with practiced ease. Within a few minutes, he stood before Schlatt's office.

Voices drifted from inside. Schlatt and Quackity, most likely planning their next move.

Antfrost knocked three times, then tucked his arms behind his back. He took a deep, shaky breath, trying to expel all his nerves. Aries didn't respond well to nervousness or rambling. Antfrost had once seen the mob boss shoot a new hire who had stumbled over the business report.

“Come in.”

One more breath. Then Antfrost pulled his shoulders back, settled an aloof expression on his face, and stepped into the office.

Schlatt sat behind his desk, feet kicked up on the elegant mahogany. Quackity stood at his side, his shoulders slumped and his fingers absently twirling a thin knife. They both watched Antfrost curiously.

“Antfrost,” Schlatt said evenly. “I didn’t expect you back so soon. What is it?”

“The Jedi are aware of your presence here, including your captives,” Antfrost reported. Even to his own ears, his voice was dull, and his heart squeezed as he realized that he sounded almost identical to Tubbo.

Schlatt's sharp jaw tightened, and Quackity's knife froze halfway through its revolution.

“What?” Schlatt asked, his voice deceptively calm. “How?”

*Just say it, the weary part of Antfrost’s brain spat. You’ve come this far. Just finish it and be damned.*

So he did – even as the words seared his tongue. “Dream said that he heard Tubbo. He didn't repeat the exact words, but he somehow knew that Tubbo was in a factory in the black market district. The task force is currently pulling up all records of your deals with manufacturing plants.”

Schlatt's near-black eyes narrowed. “Shit,” he hissed, his feet slipping from his desk. He cast a sharp glance at Quackity, and the shorter man's shoulders immediately lost their casual tilt. “Is this the factory we bought at Foolish's auction?”

Quackity's lips pressed into a thin line, and the fingers wrapped around his knife turned white. “Yeah.”

“Fuck his records,” Schlatt snarled.

Throughout the exchange, Antfrost had remained mercifully unnoticed. He stood as still as humanely possible, trying his best to avoid both attention and wrath. He longed to scamper out the door and escape the fury burning in Schlatt's eyes, but if Antfrost left without being dismissed, that was tantamount to a death sentence.

Finally, Schlatt looked up. “Find Tubbo,” the man ordered, his voice low and dark. “We're gonna have a little chat.”

Antfrost's stomach twisted into a tight knot, but he nodded once. The tension suddenly drained from the men standing before him, and Quackity sighed loudly, sinking onto the edge of Schlatt's desk.

“I'm disappointed,” Quackity muttered, and it really sounded like he was. “Tubbo was shaping up to be such a good little sidekick.”

Schlatt leaned forward in his chair, gently running a thumb along Quackity's bottom lip. “Don't worry, pumpkin,” he all but purred. “We'll find you another one. One that takes less convincing.”

The grin that spread across Quackity's face could only be described as maniacal.

“Get out of here, Antfrost,” Schlatt called. “Get Tubbo.”

Antfrost didn't even wait for Schlatt to look up. He skipped out the door and shut it firmly behind him, collapsing against it. As soon as he escaped the oppressive room, all of Antfrost's repressed emotions came toppling down on his shoulders. He took a gasping breath and pressed his forehead against the cool iron.

*Congrats, Antfrost's conscience told him darkly. You've just condemned Tubbo.*



*No, I didn't*, he argued back weakly. But it was a futile protest, and as he started at the factory's main floor, he barely managed to stay upright.

He'd broken things he couldn't repair before.

But now? Tubbo was going to die.

And he couldn't do anything to stop it.

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“They should be in here,” Techno called, pointing at the doors to the armory. “Two Force presences in the backroom. Blue and amber.”

Phil immediately switched course and swept past his partner, throwing the front doors open with a Force burst. Admittedly, it was a dramatic entrance. But Phil didn't have time to slow down. It had taken far too long already to find George and Sapnap, and the two would undoubtedly be resistant to Phil and Techno's news.

Who wouldn't be? No one would react well to being told that two of their friends were traitors to the Order they'd built their lives upon.

*George might be easy*, Techno corrected, and Phil acknowledged the theory with a tight nod. *He's been in the Underworld. He knows the power mob bosses that have.*

Phil swallowed, torn between nausea and fury as he rushed through the armory. Before the task force meeting, he'd believed that Tubbo was just an unwilling participant in a situation beyond his control. Now... Dream had heard the boy's voice, crying through their bond. Was it a ruse? What sort of army did Aries have waiting for them? For fuck's sake, they didn't have enough information!

“He's stressed,” Techno said aloud. Phil flinched at his partner's voice and glanced at Techno, curious despite their haste. The taller man shrugged. “His padawan just screamed for help, Phil. He's probably worried he's gonna show up and Tubbo will already be dead.”

The image of Tubbo, sprawled at odd angles on a cold floor, flashed through Phil's head. He brushed it away and desperately ignored his roiling stomach.

“When did you become the reasonable one between?” Phil asked weakly. “Aren't I supposed to be keeping us out of trouble?”

It was a pathetic attempt at their usual banter, but Phil was clinging to his sanity by bare threads. An Underworld mission where it was only him and Techno was one thing. They had control, intel, a bond to protect them. Mobilizing the entire task force to storm the factory Dream had “heard” Tubbo's voice at was suicide. As both a member of the Council and a “senior” Jedi, the burden of protection landed solidly on Phil's shoulders.

He wasn't strong enough to keep that many people safe

A few of his emotions must have trickled across their bond because Techno's lips twitched in a thin smile. “I wasn't the one who just got yelled at by Dream,” the pig Jedi said dryly. “That's enough to make *anyone* shaky.”

Phil couldn't help but chuckle at that. Compared to some of the mob bosses he and Techno had met, Dream was equivalent to a puppy yapping petulantly.

Mob boss. Aries. Ambush.

Phil clenched his jaw and strode a little faster.

Walking side by side, he and Techno all but emitted a repellent force field. Jedi and Temple workers alike scrambled from their path with terrified looks, and had not the situation been so dire, Phil might have laughed. He must have picked up some intimidation tactics from Techno over the years. Regardless of how, they reached the backroom in a matter of minutes.

Just before Techno reached the door, Phil impulsively threw out an arm. “Wait, wait, wait,” he muttered. His partner glanced at him expectantly. “How are we gonna do this? We have to prove to them that Tubbo and Antfrost are traitors.”

Techno's eyes hardened. “George must have felt it. Open to the Force or not, he's not stupid.”

Phil grimaced. As they'd reviewed the suspects, things had slowly fit into places – a missing presence in the Temple, disguised by the overwhelming power of everything else, combined by constant off-planet missions and a tendency to slip away when things got dirty. Then realization and anger had flared across their bond, and Phil had looked up to see Antfrost staring at Techno, the cat Jedi's face slack with terror.

It had all made sense then. But it also meant that the ambush Dream was recklessly throwing them into was even more dangerous. A Jedi as talented as Antfrost would throw everything into havoc.

“George might have felt it,” Phil agreed quietly, “but what about Sapnap?”

For a split second, Techno hesitated. Then he shook his head slightly and pressed his thumb against the control panel, making the door slid aside. His voice echoed around Phil's head as they both stepped into the room.

*Sapnap's not stupid, either.*

The armory's backroom was larger than most in the building, packed from floor to ceiling with weapons, equipment, and everything else one would need for a rush mission. Phil would know; he and Techno had spent many a frantic hour in this very room.

George and Sapnap stood at the center table, peering down at a bag. It was clearly stuffed (by items such as a coil of rope, a canteen, and a kit of some sort, if Phil recognized the outline correctly), and more equipment was scattered across the table. However, as soon as Phil and Techno stepped into the room, George and Sapnap both looked up.

“Good, you're still here,” Phil said briskly, preemptively cutting off any questions either man could ask. “We have a problem.”

The startled hunch left Sapnap's shoulders, and the younger man leaned a hip against the table. “Wow, I wouldn't have guessed,” he drawled. “I thought we were just raiding a factory for shits and giggles.”

Phil infused every bit of anger he felt into his glare, and a sick sense of satisfaction touched his heart as Nick recoiled. “We know who the third traitor is.”

The last remnants of cockiness drained from Sapnap's face. He glanced at George, who was watching Techno curiously.

*I think he noticed your little stare-off,* Phil noted dryly, and Techno scoffed.

But suspicions weren't enough to convey the danger they were in. So Phil took a deep, deep breath, gathered all of his remaining patience, and launched into what little evidence he and Techno had.

"We know they have to be a Jedi who can avoid detection, right? The info you-" Phil waved a hand at George. "-and Dream got from Kan Bo Salem proves that. So, even if they aren't powerful, they have incredible control over the Force. They've also managed to shield other Force presences and force someone to relive their worst fears, and they've got a silver lightsaber. Eret would be the obvious answer, but-"

"Whoa, whoa, time-out," George interrupted, waving his hands a little. Phil barely bit back an irritated snarl. They didn't have *time* for this. "How do you know what color their lightsaber is? Have you seen them?"

Phil's annoyance stumbled over its own feet. Logically, he knew he should just rush through what happened and move on, but... the story wasn't his. He glanced at Techno. *You wanna tell them?*

Techno winced. "I ran into the third traitor when Phil and I were going after Wilbur and Tommy," the taller man admitted after a moment. "They, uh... kinda scrambled my head. When I woke up, I saw their lightsaber, and I heard their voice. They had a voice modulator on, but I recognized it. So the traitor has to be someone I've met and remembered."

"And that's a very small pool," Phil muttered. Techno shot him a half-hearted glare, but Phil ignored it. "So, who's a strong Jedi with a silver lightsaber that Techno would know? Aside from Eret?"

George just blinked, and he glanced between Phil and Techno as if he was waiting for further explanation. But horror spread across Sapnap's face. His Force presence began rippling, displaying his inner conflict, and Phil pressed his lips together. Here came the fucked-up realization.

"Ant," Sapnap mumbled. "It's- it's fucking Antfrost, isn't it?"

"What?" George demanded. He rounded on Sapnap with anger blazing in his eyes, but the shorter man didn't even flinch. "How the fuck can you think that? Antfrost was-"

"And Tubbo."

That shut George up. The engineer reeled back, but Sapnap lifted his head, meeting Phil's gaze with what would only be described as bone-deep exhaustion.

"It's Tubbo, too, huh?" Sapnap asked heavily. "He and Ant have been working against us for- gods, who knows how fucking long."

Phil nodded once, slowly. Nothing about this situation was going how he'd expected, and Techno's hesitation glowed like a gigantic warning sign in the back of his head. "Yes," he said carefully. "That's what Techno and I think. How'd you get there so fast?"

Sapnap pressed his palms into his eyes, and suddenly, he looked a decade older. "George was telling me about this fucking stand-off Techno and Ant had at the meeting," the Knight said. George had the decency to look abashed. "I thought it was weird, y'know, and then George mentioned the choppy emotions flowing off of Ant. And-"

The Knight trailed off with a watery laugh. After a moment, Phil's brain caught up with Sapnap's explanation, and memories clicked in place.

"It reminded you of Tubbo," Phil finished quietly.

Sapnap nodded. Misery was written in every line of his body.

“Alright, look, I can kind of understand if Ant turned on us,” George cut in, his brow furrowed. “I mean, putting aside how ridiculous that is, mob bosses can be fucking terrifying. But Tubbo? He’s a good kid, and he loves Dream more than he does himself. Why would he do this?”

Phil was torn between laughing and screaming. Tubbo was a good kid. And he *did* love Dream. Ruse or not, Tubbo could be genuinely suffering, and the thought made anxiety prick at Phil’s skin.

But Phil was saved from answering by a gentle touch on his shoulder, cutting off his weary inhale. He paused, relieved, and gratefully yielded the floor to his partner.

“George, when’s the last time you talked to Tubbo?” Techno asked. His voice wasn’t judgmental nor accusatory, but there was a distinct edge of “cut your bullshit” in it. “Before the Second Temple Siege, right? Because he went into a coma after the siege, and you and Dream went into the Underworld. Then Dream and I got kidnapped, and you left again. Now *he’s* gone.”

The engineer’s mouth opened, closed, and opened again. George looked like he wanted to protest, but the beginnings of horrified realization creased the corners of his eyes.

“Sapnap has been here the whole time,” Techno continued, waving a hand at said Knight. “He watched over Tubbo; we were in the infirmary together for a *while*. He knows what he’s talking about.”

*That’s a little harsh*, Phil thought absently.

The emotional equivalent of a sigh rattled over their bond. *No, it’s not. It’s the truth. And George needs to hear it so we can hurry up and make plans before Dream drags us out of here. I wish he’d given us time to prepare.*

*Good point. Go on.*

Their mental conversation was interrupted by a quiet *ahem*, and Phil glanced up. George and Sapnap both looked at him, faces drawn and shoulders stiff. However, something in their eyes had changed. There was less indignation and more acceptance.

“Listen, Philza, I’m not gonna think about the fact that one of my oldest friends fucked me over,” Sapnap began quietly. “And I’m not gonna think about the fact that Tubbo has been working for the sick piece of shit that has made our lives hell. But if you and Technoblade are right, we’re gonna run into them at the factory. What are we gonna do?”

Phil inhaled deeply. “To be honest, I don’t know,” he admitted, barely resisting the urge to rub his eyes. “We haven’t told Dream. I don’t know what he’d fucking do if he knew about our suspicions. So... the best I can suggest is to be on your guard. If Aries is at the factory, he’ll use both of ‘em as leverage against us.”

George and Sapnap both looked crushed. Their Force presences wobbled like unstable jelly, and their hands kept twitching as if their nerves were firing without restraint. Phil didn’t blame them. He couldn’t even imagine what he’d feel if someone he cared about was a traitor.

Well. That wasn’t true. But, much in the same way that Sapnap avoided the thought of Antfrost, Phil refused to think about Tubbo. He’d cross that bridge when he reached it.

“Alright, we don’t have a lot of time,” Techno muttered, breaking the heavy silence. “Have you guys packed?”

Both men snapped to attention, visibly relieved to have something to do, and George hurriedly picked up the bag he'd been packing.

“A coil of rope, water, some dried rations, and some knives,” the engineer listed off. “I know it seems like a lot, but-”

Phil held up a hand. He knew to pack for any eventuality, too.

Some of the anxiety drained from George's face at Phil's silent understanding. “Okay, yeah. Um... An extra shirt, just in case. Medkit, a wrench, and a set of lockpicks.”

“But this is gonna be a fast mission,” Sapnap interjected dryly, driving an elbow into George's side and earning an annoyed grunt for his trouble. “I know it's in your fucking nature or something to prepare for anything, but it's gonna be fine. In and out.”

“In and out,” George echoed quietly.

Phil knew better than to hope for things to go that smoothly. Even before this latest catastrophe, he'd been reading his and Techno's old mission logs, searching for crumbs of information about Aries (as well as calling in a few favors). The mysterious Underworld boss had made a career out of creating war and supplying the demand. Over time, he'd switched from antagonizing the conquering. Aries's influence and control could be seen in over 500 levels.

No way he'd let a bunch of Jedi waltz into his factory.

Phil's earpiece suddenly whined to life, and he hissed as static assaulted his ears. Once the frequency stabilized, Phil could make out the message being delivered.

*“We're moving out. Meet at the gates.”*

Dream's clipped tones repeated, clearly pre-recorded and probably mass-sent to the entire task force. Phil quickly canceled the loop and glanced at his companions. Techno was also clutching his ear, brows furrowed, and George and Sapnap both stared down at George's wrist communicator.

“Shit,” Phil muttered. “Let's go. Dream might leave without us.”

George and Sapnap both gave nervous chuckles at that, but Techno fixed Phil with a worried frown. The taller man knew just as well as Phil that Dream might leave without them.

Phil turned and swept out of the backroom. He hurried towards the armory entrance, and once Techno caught up and settled into place at his shoulder, a path opened before them. Phil devoted half his attention to making sure George and Sapnap didn't fall behind and the other half to Dream's Force presence. The Jedi Master's emerald glow lit up the entire gates, raging like a wildfire.

Phil walked a little faster.

*Hey. Listen to them.*

*Who?* Phil asked, confused.

*George and Sapnap.*

Techno almost sounded amused, so Phil quickly turned his ear to the conversation the two younger

men were having.

“-fight,” Sapnap said, and he huffed a laugh. “George, we’ll be fine. Clay’s kinda losing his shit, but he’ll get us through this. And we’ve got Technoblade, Philza, and Eret coming with us. Put with Clay, and that’s four of the most powerful Jedi in this Temple. And we’ve got you! I mean, that’s not saying much, but-”

“Don’t count yourself out,” George interrupted. His voice was laced with fondness. “It’s about time you’re inducted as part of the task force.”

“You- what?”

“You graduated to Jedi Master at 19, Nick. That’s rare. You must be a little special.”

Silence hung over them for a second, and although he wasn’t part of the conversation, Phil found himself holding his breath. Then Sapnap laughed again, a little brighter, and Phil let out a silent sigh of relief.

“Aw, Georgie,” Sapnap cooed. “I didn’t realize you think so highly of me.”

“Shut up. You literally didn’t even pack, so if something happens at the factory, I’m not-”

Phil tuned out the conversation once again, but he couldn’t hide a concerned frown. Yes, his heart was warmed by the fact that George and Sapnap seemed to be closer than ever – that wasn’t his concern. His concern was that Sapnap (and, presumably, most of the task force) thought the combined might of himself, Techno, Eret, and a very unstable Dream would be enough to take down Aries.

When Phil glanced at Techno, he found his partner mirroring his frown.

Phil couldn’t deny that the four of them were powerful, and put together, they were a force of nature.

But what could nature do against an Underworld army?

---

Tubbo knew it was a bad idea. Every nerve in his body screamed for him to turn around and exit the hallway, leaving the prison block of the factory far, far behind. His stupid, *stupid* outburst had undoubtedly attracted Dream’s attention, and given that the task force had already been closing in, they were probably planning a raid.

A raid wouldn’t be so bad, all things considered. Tubbo would be tossed in a cell with Wilbur and Tommy, and he’d just have to lie about being held separate from them. To make it convincing, Quackity would rough him up a little, and things would be... fine. Just fine.

But things weren’t fine. Things hadn’t been fucking “fine” in weeks, and Tubbo would be damned if he was rescued from Aries’s clutches without at least making sure Wilbur and Tommy were still alive!

A sudden wave of nausea almost drove Tubbo to his knees, and he frantically latched onto the greasy wall, clapping a hand over his mouth.

Wilbur and Tommy *weren’t* dead. Tubbo would have felt them go, because Antfrost’s shields were strong, but they weren’t that strong. Besides, the cat Jedi had left for the Temple a few hours ago,

so the shields might not be in place at all.

Come to think of it, Antfrost being at the Temple was probably the only reason Tubbo had been able to reach Dream through the Force. But, since Tubbo had been “kidnapped,” then the task force would have been gathered. And if the task force was gathered, then...

“Shit,” Tubbo breathed aloud. A hysterical little giggle bubbled up in his chest, and Tubbo clasped both hands over his mouth. “Shit, shit, shit, shit, shit.”

Antfrost knew. Antfrost knew Tubbo had reached out to Dream, so he'd probably come running back to tell Schlatt and Quackity. Antfrost knew, and- and- and-

Oh, gods. Aries was going to kill him.

Tubbo's legs suddenly moved without his permission. When he blinked, he found himself flying down the hallway, boots splashing through the puddles of oil. His breaths came in short gasps, and Tubbo felt like a boulder rested on his shoulders. He couldn't think straight anymore; thoughts appeared and disappeared in flashes of color.

As soon as Antfrost told Schlatt that Tubbo had reached out to Dream, the mob boss would find him. And once the mob boss found him, Tubbo was dead. That was it. Schlatt didn't tolerate rats, especially once that led Jedi to his door.

*I wonder if Master Wilbur would deliver a message to Dream for me,* Tubbo thought absently. The thought was formed with perfect coherence. After a few more moments, an eerie calm settled over Tubbo's body. It blanketed him, stifled him, turned his raging thoughts into a blank void.

Tubbo had known this would happen eventually. A few hours ago, he'd even told himself that it would be him or Quackity. One of them had to die, and, well- that choice had been made for him.

*I'll just see Tommy one more time. I'll say I'm sorry, and maybe they'll forgive me. I hope Master Wilbur tells Dream that I'm sorry. I didn't mean for all of this to happen.*

What had he wanted to happen? When Antfrost had reached out to him while he'd been in a coma, Tubbo had been scared but not unduly worried. Then Quackity had left him a message on the holocom, and Tubbo had gone from scared to petrified.

*“Hey, Tubbo! I think that's your name. Yeah, yeah, Tubbo! Anyway, I'm the Night Thief, and I'm here to make your life a living hell. Uh- listen, I work for this big boss, right? And he thinks you'd be valuable. We've got some good intel on you. So here's the deal: you cooperate with us, or I sneak into the Temple and slit all of your friends' fucking throats while they sleep.”*

Quackity's jovial tones still made Tubbo's skin crawl. Schlatt terrified the ever-loving shit out of him, but Quackity had been the one to make him fear the name “Aries.” Quackity had been the one to drag Tubbo into the middle of nowhere to give him orders. Quackity had been the one who left little trinkets for Tubbo to find. It had gotten to the point where Tubbo had stopped sleeping at night for fear of Quackity breaking in while he rested.

“Me or him,” Tubbo mumbled aloud, his voice wispy even to his own ears. “I guess it's me.”

The hallway suddenly widened, and Tubbo's looping thoughts came to a stuttering halt. He dug his heels into the slick concrete and looked around.

He'd made it to the prison block. Cells lined both walls, red force fields flickering in each doorway. Silence hung over the hallway. What had Tubbo expected, really? From what Quackity had said,

the prison block had been thrown together as temporary holding for any prisoners they picked up. The cells were all empty.

...except for one about halfway down the hallway, in which two Force presences burned as bright as a sun – one amber, one ice blue.

Tubbo swallowed thickly. Now that he'd stopped, his brain was starting to catch up. On the minuscule chance that Master Wilbur didn't remember Quackity's appearance at the Temple, how would Tubbo explain this? He'd miraculously escaped?

No. Nothing for it but to tell the truth and pray that his friends – former friends – would grant him enough grace to send a message.

Tubbo summoned all his strength and took a shaky step forward. Would he be greeted with hate? Fear?

*Shuffle, shuffle.*

Maybe Wilbur and Tommy would be unconscious. Or tranquilized! That way, Tubbo could write a note and just leave it for them to find!

*Shuffle, shuffle.*

Maybe they were already dead. Force presences sometimes lingered after death, just like Val's had after being shot through the head. Nausea churned Tubbo's stomach at the memory, and when he rubbed his eyes, his palms came away wet. What were two more friends dead because of him? He'd already gotten Val killed.

*Shuffle.*

Tubbo stopped before the red force field. The cell beyond was small, with a ragged cot bolted to the wall, an empty bucket overturned on the floor, and a dried-up bacta patch discarded in the corner.

But all those facts were unimportant compared to the two people inside. Tommy laid on the cot, curled into the fetus position with his back to Tubbo. Wilbur sat hunched at his padawan's feet, one hand resting protectively on Tommy's hip. Wilbur's right pant leg was soaked with blood.

A whimper slipped out before Tubbo could stop it. He pressed his mouth against his sleeve, but as Tommy's shoulders gently rose and fell, Tubbo couldn't quite stifle a choked sob.

They were alive. They were *alive*.

“Master Wilbur,” Tubbo whispered. “It's me. It's Tubbo.”

Somehow, Wilbur heard him. The Jedi Master's eyes instantly fluttered open, narrowed against the glare of the force field. Then his gaze landed on Tubbo, and Wilbur's face contorted as quickly as a malfunctioning holomask.

“Tubbo,” Wilbur gasped in return. He tried to stand but instantly collapsed back to the cot, hissing through gritted teeth. Tubbo took a step forward before remembering he couldn't do anything.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” Wilbur demanded, his voice strained. “You're- you're-”

Just like that, a chilly edge entered Wilbur's eyes. *He knows*, part of Tubbo's mind thought miserably. But the other part of him rejoiced. At least he could be honest.



"I'm a spy," Tubbo finished dully. "I'm only free because Aries likes me."

Wilbur's face again underwent a rapid change. "Aries? He's fucking *here*?"

"Yeah. He and Quackity- uh, the Night Thief." Tubbo swallowed a guilty chuckle. "You remember him, right? He's the guy that showed up at the Temple and-" Tubbo's mirth abandoned him as quickly as it had arrived. "-and killed Val."

For a few seconds, it seemed like Wilbur's brain simply stopped working. The taller man stared at him, blank-faced and completely unmoving. Just as Tubbo was considering rapping on the force field to rouse the Jedi Master, Wilbur snapped back to attention. His dark eyes felt like a knife to Tubbo's gut.

"Are you okay?" Wilbur asked. His voice had softened, and he scanned Tubbo with visible concern. "Are you safe out there?"

A giggle bubbled out before Tubbo could tamp it down. "No," he said, barely stifling a second giggle. "No. I, uh- I cracked. Schlatt knows I-"

"Schlatt?" Wilbur interrupted.

"Oh, right. Uh, that's Aries's name. Schlatt."

Wilbur blinked, clearly confused, and Tubbo suddenly realized that there was so much he knew that none of his friends knew. If not for the dire situation he was in, he'd almost be proud. He'd infiltrated an Underworld mob boss's inner circle and gained trust!

Pity that trust was about to be smashed to pieces.

"Tu-Tubbo?"

The sudden voice brought Tubbo back to the present like a stone launched from a slingshot. His heart punched through his chest, and when Tommy slowly rolled over, Tubbo's legs began to shake.

"Tommy," he whispered. "Tommy, you're- you're okay. You-"

Before Tubbo could get his words past the ball in his throat, Tommy scrambled off of the cot. He collapsed to the floor with a strangled noise, but he instantly sprang back to his knees, crawling over to the force field. Tommy's pale eyes were wide, and for the second time in however many minutes, Tubbo found himself crying.

"Oh, gods, Tubbo, I was so worried about you," Tommy babbled, pressing his hands to the force field. "I didn't know where you were, and I can't sense anyone except fucking Wilbur. It's kinda cramped in here, and I have a headache, but you-"

Tubbo broke.

He blinked, and he found himself on his knees, his hands pressed against Tommy's. Faintly, he could hear both Wilbur and Tommy talking to him, but Tubbo couldn't lift his head. He couldn't even blink away his tears.

Wilbur knew. Tommy knew. Yet they both greeted him with concern and fondness, even as they were trapped with no way out.

What had Tubbo done to earn that?

“Tubbo. Tubbo, look at me.”

Wilbur's quiet command broke through Tubbo's haze, and for a split second, fear spiked through his body. He whipped his head up. Only when he met Wilbur's worried gaze did Tubbo remember he wasn't talking to Schlatt or Quackity. He was with his friends.

“Tubbo, where are we?” Wilbur asked gently, leaning forward just a little. He still hadn't stood, and Tubbo blearily realized that something must have happened to Wilbur's leg. “How the fuck do we get out of here?”

Tubbo shook his head a little, pressing his hands harder against the force field. “You can't,” he mumbled. “But don't worry. Dream knows I'm here.” Both Wilbur and Tommy frowned, and Tubbo hurriedly added, “I accidentally projected to him, so I'm pretty sure he'll bring the whole task force with him. You guys will get out of here soon.”

“And you?” Tommy asked hurriedly.

Tubbo blinked. *I'm going to die*, he wanted to say. But that was no way to part with his friends.

“I'll be fine,” Tubbo said, lying through his teeth. He'd gotten good at that. “Listen, when Dream gets here, I want you to tell him something. From me. Tell him... tell him I'm sorry. I didn't mean for all of this to happen, and he was the best Master I've ever had. I hope he learns how to be happy.”

Tommy's face contorted in confusion, but Wilbur's eyes widened.

“What the fuck does that mean, Tubbo?” the Jedi Master asked sharply. “What the fuck is going to happen?”

But time was up. Tubbo felt Antfrost's Force presence approaching the hallway, and he didn't want his last interaction with his friends to be tainted by his fear. So Tubbo smiled weakly, stood, and stepped back from the cell. When he glanced to his right, Antfrost stood a couple of cells away.

“Does he know?” Tubbo asked. He felt strangely peaceful, even though he knew what Antfrost's appearance meant.

The cat Jedi inclined his head fractionally. “Yes,” he said slowly. “And you know why I'm here.”

Tubbo nodded once.

“Alright. Let's go.”

Tubbo glanced back at his friends, and an odd fondness filled his chest at the fear in their eyes. “I'll see you later,” he murmured. “Take care of yourselves.”

“Tubbo!” Tommy bellowed, straining against the force field. “Don't go! I-” The blond boy's eyes suddenly landed on Antfrost, and like the flip of a switch, the fear in Tommy's eyes turned to burning rage. “Antfrost,” he gasped, horrified. “Antfrost! You fucking- **Antfrost!**”

At that, Wilbur threw himself off of the cot and crawled to the force field. Mania lined Wilbur's face as he, too, stared at the cat Jedi, who was still standing a few cells away.

“You son of a bitch,” Wilbur whispered. “You're a fucking traitor.”

Tubbo's ethereal serenity started to chip and crack at his friends' anger, and suddenly, he decided it would be best for everyone if he left while he was still calm. So he did. Tubbo nodded to Antfrost, and together, they left the prison block. Wilbur and Tommy's furious shouts echoed after them. Tubbo ignored every word.

Conversations with Antfrost were always stunted. When first running into the cat Jedi on one of his outings with Quackity, Tubbo had nearly had a meltdown. But Antfrost had barely acknowledged him, hadn't even spoken to him. After a while, Tubbo had realized the cat Jedi entered a sort of dissociative state when in "traitor mode."

When Tubbo had been developing his blank face, he'd tried to emulate Antfrost's deadpan stare as best he could. Apparently, it had worked like a charm.

They made all the way across the factory without a single word spoken, the only sounds being the hiss of machinery and pipes. Then, as they rounded the bend and entered the main floor, Antfrost broke the silence.

"He's pissed," the cat Jedi quietly. His tail flicked. "Really pissed."

Tubbo blinked, a little startled. "Schlatt?" he asked.

"Yeah. Said he wanted to have a chat with you."

They both knew what that meant. Tubbo shrugged and focused his gaze on the metal walkways below. The jets of hot air still made him shiver.

"Look, Tubbo... I can get you out of here."

That broke Tubbo's peace. He stumbled to a stop in the middle of the walkway, gaping at Antfrost. The cat Jedi had stopped ahead of him, but his shoulders were tight with tension, and what little Tubbo could feel of Antfrost's emotions were chaotic and charged.

"Get me out of here?" Tubbo echoed dumbly. "Like... out of the factory?"

"Off the planet," Antfrost corrected. Though he still didn't turn, his voice was quiet – almost apologetic. "I have contacts from all my missions. Say the word, and I can get you away from here forever. Schlatt will never find you."

For a split second, Tubbo considered the offer. He'd be abandoning all of his friends, but he would keep his life. He'd been able to start over somewhere, make new friends, maybe become part of a community. He wouldn't be involved with a devious mob boss.

Then the implications of Antfrost's offer sunk in, and Tubbo smiled sadly at the cat Jedi's back. "But Schlatt would know you helped me," he murmured. "And he'd kill you. Either to find where I was or just as punishment."

Antfrost was silent for a moment. Then:

"I know."

Tubbo almost cried a third time. He didn't even know what he wanted to do, but his heart wailed at the chance to *survive*. Tubbo's serenity was dangling by puppet strings, and one snip would break him forever. He could escape. *He could-*

"Ah, Tubbo. You're here."

Just like that, Tubbo's dreams of a new life hit the ground and shattered. Slowly, ever so slowly, Tubbo looked up. Quackity leaned against the balcony outside Schlatt's office, twiddling a knife between his fingers. End over end it spun, a mesmerizing flash of silver.

“Quackity,” Tubbo rasped. His voice no longer obeyed his command to be confident and stoic. “Fancy meeting you here.”

The Night Thief's smile was as dry as kindling. “Oh, real big fucking surprise. Get the fuck up here before I put this knife between your fucking eyes. You too, Antfrost. Schlatt wants you to guard the door.”

*No one will find my body*, Tubbo thought, hysteria and acceptance wrestling in his mind. Regardless, his conditioning trumped his terror, and he obediently trotted across the final walkway and up the stairs.

Quackity watched him with a predatory gleam in his eyes. Once Tubbo reached Schlatt's office, the Night Thief leaned into his path with a twisted grin.

“You thought you were so fucking clever, huh?” Quackity whispered, grabbing Tubbo's shoulder before he could pass. Tubbo froze. Quackity's fingers felt like daggers digging into his shoulder muscles. “You thought you could use Antfrost's shields to call for help? Guess what, you fucking idiot. Antfrost wasn't here. Dream heard you all right, but Antfrost saw it happen. Nothing gets past us.”

*Dream heard me*, Tubbo thought, relieved. Suddenly, the fear vanished from his mind. *That's all that matters. At least Wilbur and Tommy will get out of here.*

“I wasn't calling for help,” Tubbo said aloud, turning to meet Quackity's gaze. He dropped his blank mask over his face, and something deep within Tubbo ruffled with pride as Quackity flinched at the change. “I just wanted him to know how miserable I was. That I wanted to go home, but two fucking sadists were using me as their plaything instead of doing their dirty work themselves.”

For just a second, discomfort creased Quackity's face. Then it was gone, replaced by the thief's impeccable, cocky facade. “I do like seeing you squirm,” Quackity snarled, and he shoved Tubbo towards the office. “Go in. Don't bother knocking.”

Tubbo did. He swung the cast-iron open just as he had the first time and stepped inside. But, instead of cowering, Tubbo strolled in. He had nothing left to lose. Dream had once told him to go out with a bang, and by the name of every god, that's what Tubbo would do.

Schlatt was clearly waiting for him. The lean man leaned against his desk, his hands shoved in his pockets and his sleeves rolled up. A wide assortment of weapons sat on the mahogany, lovingly wrapped in cloths.

Part of Tubbo's brain wanted to sob at the fury staining Schlatt's cheeks. Tubbo promptly told it to shut the fuck up.

“There's only one thing I wanna know before we get started,” Schlatt said, and he cracked his knuckles. His ram's horns glinted in the overhead lights as he tipped his head to the side. “Did you really think you could get away with it? Get one over on me?”

Dream's face suddenly popped into Tubbo's head, and with a rush of fierce determination, Tubbo mimicked his Master's sneer as best he could. “I already told Quackity why I did what I did,” he

said, mocking Schlatt's drawl. He was gratified by the dark scowl that creased Schlatt's face. "And I don't think I have to repeat myself to *you*."

Before Tubbo could even enjoy his rebellion, Quackity locked his arms behind his back in a pincher grip, and Schlatt stormed over him in three quick strides.

"You're a bold motherfucker, Tubbo," Schlatt hissed, and he grabbed Tubbo's chin, forcing his head forward. "But I don't take insolence from a mouthy rat."

Schlatt's fist swung towards Tubbo's face like a falling meteor. Just before the blow connected, Tubbo inhaled deeply and sank himself into the Force.

Vaguely, Tubbo realized that Antfrost must have lowered the Force-preventive shields surrounding the factory. He mentally thanked the cat Jedi for that meager comfort, whether it had been intentional or not. Tubbo heaved another breath, then settled in to wait.

He knew what came next. It was the only logical conclusion. Schlatt would destroy his body, and once the mob boss finally had his fill of blood and gore, he would put Tubbo out of his misery. Even through the comforting haze of the Force, Tubbo felt minor impacts and heard himself screaming in agony. But he didn't feel any of it.

When Tubbo finally died, he'd pass on without having ever felt a thing.

For several peaceful minutes, Tubbo sat there, suspended. He watched with detached curiosity as his body slowly broke apart, bones splintering into mere shards and muscles tearing in two. It was morbidly fascinating to watch.

But, eventually, Schlatt landed the final blow. Tubbo knew it was such because a crack appeared in his Force bubble, and stinging pain gripped his right side. One of his shattered ribs had probably punctured a lung. The Force quickly forced the pain away, but Tubbo smiled as it faded. That was it. He was finally free of this whole fucking mess.

Then a blinding haze crashed into Tubbo like a supernova, and he screamed as his entire body was wrapped in burning coils. But, even amidst the chaos and the realization that the Force had *disappeared*, he registered two things.

He couldn't breathe. *He couldn't even fucking see.*

A blurry figure moved somewhere to Tubbo's right. He tried to turn his head to see what it was, but his body wouldn't register his commands. His back crashed into something hard, and a scream tore itself from Tubbo's throat. Gods, he couldn't *think*. Even with his brain desperately trying to shield himself from how much it fucking hurt, Tubbo felt like he was submerged in lava.

"We still have that bacta tank, right?"

His broken ears struggled to recognize the voice, and after a moment, Tubbo realized it was Schlatt. Why would Schlatt need a bacta tank?

"Yup." That was Quackity, sounding all too chipper. Tubbo wanted to punch him in the throat. "It's a little old, but it works."

"Great. Throw him in there, Antfrost. I need him functional when the Jedi show up. He's lucky I still want to use him, or I would have slit his throat right here."

Tubbo only had time to think, *what?* before fuzzy arms scooped him up. He tried to scream as

agony again raced along every part of his body, but all his torn vocal cords could muster was a sound like static. The arms holding him suddenly warmed, and the Force again cradled Tubbo's mind in a hazy cocoon.

*Is Antfrost healing me?* Tubbo thought blearily. He was barely able to string the concepts together. *But... that's not possible.*

Snippets of conversation interrupted Tubbo's confused musings, and he twisted his head just enough to hear the fading voices.

“-you like that?”

“Duh. You *destroyed* him. Looked like you were enjoying it, too.”

“Y'know, I was. It's been a long time since I got to wale on someone like that. I don't think you should count this as a complete failure, pumpkin. At least we had a little bit of fun.”

“Schlatt, baby, that was the best time I've had all year.”

A door clicked shut, and the voices disappeared. It was for the best, Tubbo supposed. Between the hideous damage dealt to his body and the Force soothing his frayed nerves, Tubbo's brain was quickly descending towards oblivion.

Just before Tubbo well and truly passed out, a silver Force presence gently brushed his mind. Tubbo allowed it inside his shields with only a dazed sense of confusion.

*I'm sorry. I'm so fucking sorry. This never should have fucking happened.*

Despite all the broken bones in his face, Tubbo frowned. “But I *wanted* to die,” he slurred aloud.

Then his mind was swallowed by the abyss.

## Chapter End Notes

Thank you so, so much for reading. I know it's been a long time, but it means the world to me to have seen how much love this story got in my absence. If y'all still want to finish this ride, you can bet that I'll see it through.

If you liked this piece (that more or less heralds this story's return), please leave a comment and let me know what you thought!

At this point, I know better to promise a date. But, if how inspired I am right now is anything to go by... you'll be seeing me again soon. Take care, y'all!

# Bleeding Judas, Part 4

## Chapter Notes

You know I've truly made my return when I roll up with a 12k chapter hhhhh-

Without any further ado, welcome to the final chapter of Bleeding Judas! (We're still not at the end of this story, but y'all will get some hints about definite length soon...)

TW for lots of talk about death, some semi-graphic descriptions of violence/injury, and... lots of peril. *I don't know what to tell y'all-*

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

In the four years George had been away from the Temple, he'd thought a lot about his childhood and apprenticeship under Cho-Nal. He'd reminisced about long hours of training and drills performed before sunrise (with varying degrees of fondness). However, one of George's clearest memories was of a fire alarm wailing in the dead of night. He, Clay, and Nick had been rushed out of the Padawan Quarters in their pajamas, and the masters had directed them with steely commands.

George felt like a padawan again. He stood amidst a whirlwind of activity, shouts ringing through the air and the Force rippling like a disturbed pond. On some instinctive level, George knew he should be overwhelmed. Inexperienced Jedi leaked emotions like a broken speeder leaking fuel, and the sheer amount of power congregated in one area was nauseating.

Of course, George wasn't overwhelmed. As soon as they'd left the Temple, he'd shut off his connection to the Force. Injury or not, he had to be at full capacity for the factory raid.

And a raid it was going to be. The factory towered over them, a hulking behemoth of gleaming blackmetal and rusted iron plates, surrounded by massive electric fences. The task force had erected a makeshift base camp just outside, and Philza and Techno shouted orders from atop a box of blasters.

*They look fucking terrifying,* George thought absently. *No wonder everyone's listening to them.*

Both Philza and Techno had fire in their eyes, and their Force presences whirled around them, forming a figure-eight of green and red. Put with their billowing robes, and it looked like they could storm the factory by themselves. George was half-convinced they'd succeed.

Below them, Jedi rushed around like worker ants. Lightsabers glowed, people shouted, and boots slapped against the cracked street. The raid was coming closer, and George was prepared for war.

Then again... it didn't seem like that would be a problem.

No one was directing *him*.

George didn't blame Philza or Techno. There were almost a hundred Jedi in their camp, called from the reserves for the current strike. It was a miracle the two Jedi Masters were somehow controlling

the chaos.

Still, their eyes passed over him like he wasn't even there.

Some selfish part of George wanted to claim that *none* of his friends had been given orders. But that wasn't true. Clay had disappeared in the mayhem, but he had been elected to lead a charge. Nick was to accompany him. Eret was most likely going to infiltrate the factory, and gods knew Philza and Techno were more than capable of tearing down whatever was needed of them.

It was simple, really. He wasn't needed.

“Shut up,” George muttered aloud, pressing a hand to his temples. The little voice in his head simply shrugged, and George's already foul mood dropped a few more notches.

*Of course* he wasn't needed. Even if he and Philza had had time to reopen his Force connection, what was he compared to a hundred trained Jedi? An Underworld engineer with a staff and two lightsabers he barely knew how to use. Why was he here?

*I'm here because I want to help Tubbo*, George thought stubbornly, and he dug his nails into his palm – a bad habit he'd developed when stressed. *I have to be able to do something.*

But, looking around, there was nothing to do. Everyone had their place. Everyone had their orders. Even Nick, who had only just been acknowledged as part of the task force, had been sent to find Clay. George was... just getting in the way. He wasn't even spared him a glance.

Something in George's chest crumbled.

What had he expected, really? He'd done his best over the past couple of months, but when it came down to raw power, he was the weakest link. If by some cosmic coincidence, George ran into Antfrost, the cat Jedi would put him on the floor in a second.

Ant. Gods. George still wasn't sure if he wanted to strangle Antfrost or break down crying. Four years in the Underworld couldn't dull the sting that betrayal wrought. A younger George might have protested the implication that his old friend had turned on them.

But George knew better. He knew the influence mob bosses had. After a bit of thinking, he'd realized he knew firsthand how charismatic Aries was. They'd only met once, back when Aries had still been known as “the Ram.”

Pitch black eyes. A lean, muscular frame. A honeyed voice, and a smile more charming than a prince's. Chills had crawled up George's spine every time he'd turned his back on Aries.

In some fucked-up way, George understood why Antfrost had rejected the Order. Even without hearing an explanation, he had reached something like acceptance – maybe even forgiveness.

But forgiveness didn't change the current situation, and George's head was starting to pound.

Something clattered nearby, breaking George from his spiraling thoughts. A nearby Jedi had knocked a box onto its side and was surveying the spilled blasters with dismay. George all but leaped at the chance to do something. He turned towards the commotion-

-only to see another Jedi lift the box upright using the Force.

George stumbled to a halt. “Right,” he muttered aloud. He refused to acknowledge the ball of bitterness slowly clogging his throat. “Right. These people are Jedi.”



*And I'm not.*

A rush of anger suddenly flooded George's chest, and he set his jaw, striding out of the makeshift camp. Some baby-faced Jedi might have shouted an order at him, but George just raised his middle finger high and slipped into the shadows of the surrounding streets.

Of course he wasn't a fucking Jedi! He didn't have a place in the Order, and that was *why* Nick had found him in the Underworld! George didn't belong on the surface anymore. He'd made his peace with that long ago.

But the warm smile Tubbo had flashed him upon their first meeting made George's chest squeeze, and he'd be damned if Antfrost or Aries or *whoever* hurt Tubbo. George didn't have a place in the Jedi's plans? Fine, whatever. Aries was from the Underworld, just like George was. The mob boss must have established secondary measures, security mandates, *something* to protect himself. Even the strongest bosses knew better than to get cocky.

And George could exploit that.

He slipped from building to building, sparing just a moment to scowl up at the setting sun. Sunset was the worst time for a raid. It blinded anyone moving against the light, and oftentimes, fleeing enemies could disappear into the glare. Still, George didn't have time to wait. After a few minutes of silent cursing, he stood in front of the factory's eastern wall.

"Alright," George muttered aloud, squinting at the blackmetal. "I am a mob boss trying to make this factory seem abandoned while still protecting myself and any resources I house here. What do I do?"

Droids were an easy option. They didn't require anything beyond basic maintenance, and specific modifications would keep them off most electrical scanners. So they would probably have to deal with highly advanced droids.

"That's a start. What else, what else?" George narrowed his eyes at the factory's roof. "Would there be anything up there?" he asked himself quietly.

Why not? It was out of sight and protected, and if Aries had thought ahead, there could be a dead man's switch for self-destruction tucked away up there.

George slipped his staff from his belt and pointed it at a jutting outcrop halfway up the wall. After a few seconds of adjustment, he fired. The grappling hook burst from its secret compartment. It arced towards its target, and George unclenched his jaw, fitting his left arm into the makeshift brace he always wore underneath his jacket.

When the line plucked him off the ground, George's shoulder didn't even strain.

He rushed towards the wall, his staff pulling him towards a point directly below the outcrop. A few seconds before impact, George tapped his heels together and activated the shock absorbers hidden in his boots. He landed without a jolt and jogged vertically for a few steps, expelling the extra momentum.

*Perfect landing*, George thought, pleased. *Been a while since I got to use suspension.*

As he hung there, a thought suddenly struck him. He was dangling from the side of a black market factory, supported only by a brace of his own invention and a staff of potential Empire origin. Nothing would prevent him from falling to his death.

Yet, he felt calmer than he had for the past two months spent at the Temple.

George allowed himself a faint smirk. Some things could only be learned from the Underworld, and once one's sense of fear had been shut off, a new world of possibilities opened up.

Not the time to pat himself on the back. The factory's roof was only one more jump away. George glanced around (how stupid would it be if he got caught now?), then extended his shock absorbers so he could peer beyond the overhang. A hulking box protruded above him, completely blocking a clean shot.

“Shit,” George sighed. He quickly hauled himself onto the overhang, then squinted up at the box. Would a 45-degree angle be enough? He couldn't tell; the box was too big. Better to go with 60 degrees, just to be safe.

George took a deep breath, quickly adjusting the settings on his grappling hook to pull a little faster and harder. He glanced up at the factory roof one more time. Then he launched himself backward, sprung further by a push from his shock absorbers.

Wind whipped his hair around his face, but George didn't need to see. He'd made it a thousand times. After two seconds of falling, George fired. The grappling hook disappeared in a flash of silver, and before George's stomach even had time to drop, he flew upwards.

George smirked once again. *A perfect shot.*

His movement launched him right over the huge box, and George landed on the roof with a quiet tap. It took exactly three seconds to collapse his staff and get his bearings before he looked around. Any immediate danger?

No. The roof was flat and uniform, without a single vent to diffuse fumes or heat.

“C'mon, c'mon,” George muttered. “Where are you? Where's the prize?”

None was forthcoming. After a couple seconds of fruitless investigation, George clicked his tongue, irritated, and started towards the front of the factory. If nothing else, maybe he could find a way to disable the electric fence.

George reached the roof's edge and peered over. The Jedi camp was still bustling with activity, and no one seemed to notice him. Just as well, really. One of the more trigger-happy Jedi might think he was one of Aries's men and start shooting.

Speaking of Aries... something silver glinted in the rafters to his left. Had the sun not been setting, it would have perfectly blended into the shadows.

*Life is taunting me,* George decided, drawing his staff from his belt once more. *It's literally just fucking with me now.*

One swing and a shock-absorbed landing later, George hung in the rafters just below the camera. The crossbeams were wide enough to stand on, so he quickly hauled himself up. A brand new security camera was suspended from the wall. It was somewhat primitive, as it hadn't registered his presence despite him sitting right next to it, but a red light winked below its lens. It aimed down at the front doors.

George mentally skimmed his list of tech, and he couldn't help an impressive grin as he settled on a likely candidate. “Security camera that functions as a trigger,” he murmured. “Not bad. I bet there's laser cannons somewhere.”

But even trigger cameras were useless when faced with experienced hands.

George quickly slipped his sack off his shoulders, undoing the top laces and reaching for a shiny metal case. Philza probably wouldn't be happy about him deigning to mention the Underworld tools he'd brought along. But if George couldn't hack the camera's system, Philza never had to know.

Once the camera's casing was removed, its wiring proved even more primitive than the sensors. Obviously, Aries had never planned for visitors.

*If it connects to a cannon... George wove his electro-pick through the wires, carefully searing a hole in the interior gel shields. Sparks flew around his fingers, but George didn't flinch away. ...then it must connect to the main power grid. If it connects to the power grid, I can trace this camera back to its hub. If I can get into the hub, the cameras are mine.*

With a grunt, George yanked the camera's "heart" (a bundle of wires as big as his fist) into the open air. He examined the clump for a moment, then picked out a connector plug. He attached his own wire, shoved the heart back into the camera, and grabbed his holopad from his sack.

Yeah, okay, there was a lot he hadn't told Philza about. Habit was stronger than virtue.

The holopad flickered to life, and George grinned at the lines of codes flashing back at him. "Okay, *Aries*," he said slowly, drawling the mob boss's name. "Let's see how good your security is."

What George expected to find was weak firewalls and a neat chain leading him back to the hub. Instead... he was greeted by a very, *very* familiar black screen covered in white text.

*ERROR: DEVICE (\_\_\_found\_\_\_) > plug x003 FUNC scan\_code MAL*

*Continue?*

*YES NO*

George blinked. He was staring at his *own* error screen. He programmed the same error screen into every piece of tech he worked on, as he trusted his own coding more than anyone else's. But what was-

A memory suddenly bubbled to the surface, and George was transported back to his shop a year previous. A well-groomed woman had entered his shop asking for an advanced security system. George had thought nothing of it and programmed it as she'd asked, installing his own coding and explaining how to access the system. The woman had thanked him, paid in full, and left. The only reason George still remembered her was because she'd paid his full wages.

She'd been one of Aries's lackeys. She must have been. And if this was the same system, then...

George swallowed the ball that had suddenly lodged in his throat. With shaking hands, he began typing.

**>YES**

*Administrator code required: \_\_\_\_\_*

*TCHL: false (device \_\_\_found\_\_\_) MAL drive\_op*

George swallowed again.

**>Emotion, ignorance, passion, chaos, death**

The holopad hummed as it considered the password, and George squeezed his eyes shut, chasing away the memories that tried to press to the front of his mind. For just a second, a million and one Jedi Masters screamed at him, reciting it over and over *and over*. Then the holopad dinged, and George snapped back to attention.

*ERROR 404*

*ACCESS RESTRICTED*

*(error MAL 003487720 CODE\_moc)*

George couldn't help but smile.

And then, the code began to change. The last "R" spun on its head and morphed into a "3", and slowly, the 404 glowed bright red. The text below it scrambled and scrambled until, finally, it settled.

*ERRO3 404*

*ACCESS GRANTED*

*(Welcome back. Let's fuck this system up.)*

With that, the black screen melted away. Sixteen separate boxes flickered to life on the holopad, each displaying crisp pictures of the factory's interior.

George took a shaky breath, desperately trying to dissipate the adrenaline running rampant in his system. But he couldn't shed his pride, and eventually, George caved. He grinned fiercely at his holopad, running a tender finger across the screen.

He never lost his touch. *Never*. Jedi could do Force shit all day long, but 404 was only the one who'd woven a back door into every single piece of tech he'd ever worked on. He was the only one who could topple any mob boss who'd ever done business with him.

*"George? What the fuck are you doing up there?"*

George flinched at the voice in his ear, and he quickly twisted to look at the Jedi camp. A group had gathered close to the electric fence. Philza and Techno stood in the front, but flanking them were Nick and Clay, the latter of which had probably been dragged back by the former.

*"George?"* Philza repeated, and even from as far away as he was, George saw a grin spreading across the Jedi Master's face.

George grinned back. He turned to his holopad and double-tapped the top right corner, which brought up a black screen and more code.

*MENU\_system (ARIES)*

**>CAMERAS**

**>VENTS**

>CANNONS

>WALKWAYS

>MACHINERY

>OUTER FENCE

>DROIDS

George navigated to “OUTER FENCE” and quickly typed, “*FUNC (outer\_fence) disable overrd 404*”. When he looked back down at the assembled Jedi, the electric fence had shut off.

“You might want to get in here, Philza,” George said, pressing a finger to his earpiece and barely stifling a chuckle. “I’ve got a *lot* of information for you.”

---

“Hey. Hey! Get up, you little shit. The show’s about to start.”

Tommy’s eyes flew open at the command. Eerily cold hands grabbed his arm, hauling him to his feet and shoving him forward. Half-asleep as he was, Tommy tripped from the momentum and crashed to the floor.

The fall woke him up. Oil splashed Tommy’s face, searing his eyes like fire, and he let out a pained gasp. At the stimulus, Tommy’s brain finally snapped to attention. He was bleeding from gashes caused by the rough floor. A short man sneered down at him, flanked by two gigantic silver droids, and two more droids had already hustled Wilbur out of their cell. The taller man shouted obscenities into the empty hallway.

Tommy’s stomach flipped. He couldn’t get separated from Wilbur. There was no chance of finding his master in the fucking Force void that *choked* this factory.

“Don’t look so worried,” the man drawled, and Tommy barely tamped down the urge to throw a punch. This was the same man from Wilbur’s memories and the task force’s pictures, the one who had shot a Falleen in the head and started all of this. The Night Thief. Quackity. “You’re following him,” Quackity continued, waving a hand at the droids.

“Don’t fucking touch-” Tommy started, recoiling from the droids.

They surged forward with superhuman speed, cutting him off and wrapping iron grips around his upper arms. Panic surged through Tommy, and he strained against the holds, lashing out at whatever he could reach. Wilbur had always told him to fight back.

But nothing worked. The droids stomped forward one heavy step at a time, dragging him after Wilbur – who, as Tommy noticed with no small amount of horror, had disappeared around the corner. He still felt his master’s presence, though.

*And that’s all that matters*, Tommy told himself. He steadfastly ignored the fight or flight instinct screaming in his nerves, as well as the intuitive knowledge that this was a catastrophic situation. As long as he could still feel Wilbur, things would be okay.

For the next five minutes, Tommy somehow managed to hold onto that fragile hope. He clung to it desperately, but once they marched past what looked like a pile of droids limbs, reality started to sink in.

Tommy was terrified. He'd fallen asleep after Tubbo had come to talk to them, and-

Gods, *Tubbo*.

Tears welled up in Tommy's eyes, unbidden. He shook his head viciously and prayed the motion would whip them away, because he would be *damned* before Quackity saw him cry. Even though Tubbo had basically said goodbye to them. Even though everything in Tubbo's voice had said, "I'm going to die." Even though Antfrost had taken him away.

Antfrost. Fucking Antfrost. Fucking Antfrost with his big, wide eyes, and meek posture, and tail that had flicked anxiously even though *he* wasn't the one going to die.

"Is the padawan getting a little riled up?"

Tommy broke out of his thoughts and found Quackity leaning in front of him, a shit-eating grin tugging at the thief's face. Tommy snarled.

"Get the fuck away from me," he hissed, and only his last ounce of self-perseveration kept him from spitting in Quackity's face. "If you didn't have these droids with you, you'd be fucking dead."

Quackity's grin only got wider. "I know!" he chirped. "And that's why they're here! I'm here to have fun, not get killed."

It would be so easy to spit in his face. Tommy had never done it before, but it would be easy, right? And gods, it would make him feel so much better to see this arrogant motherfucker taken down a few pegs. Even if Quackity punched him or shocked him, it would be worth it. Anything to just get *a few inches of personal space and-*

*Tommy, stop. You know we have to be careful right now.*

The mental rebuke was accompanied by a swirl of reassurance. It was shaky and weak, clearly a lie even to its sender. But Wilbur's presence eased some of Tommy's edge, and suddenly, it was a little easier to reign his temper in.

*We're in danger*, he responded. *I still can't feel anything, so Ant- he's got to be around here somewhere.*

*I know. I can't figure out the layout of this place. Fuck, I don't even know if we're on the surface or in the Underworld!*

Wilbur's voice was strained, and Tommy's heart skipped a beat. *Tubbo said Dream is coming, right?* he offered, trying desperately to believe that minuscule hope could come to fruition. *So he'll save us when he gets here! We just have to hold out until then!*

But what would Dream do, Tommy wondered, when he learned that Tubbo was dead?

Tommy squeezed his eyes to stifle the burn in his eyes. Wilbur must be hearing his pain, but, for once, his master didn't say anything. Tommy wasn't sure if he wanted to laugh or cry at the fact that his master had finally stopped spouting advice.

He didn't want to laugh.

"Hello? *Hello-o-o?*" Quackity suddenly huffed, again breaking Tommy from his thoughts, and he refocused in time to see the shorter man stride towards Wilbur. "I guess this really is your better half!" Quackity shouted over his shoulder, but the smile decorating his face was unstable.

Something dark and cruel lurked in the thief's eyes. "People aren't any fun when they're in control!"

With that, Quackity slammed the butt of his blaster into Wilbur's temple. A flash of pain seared across their bond, then disappeared, melting into the horrible oblivion of unconsciousness.

"Wilbur!" Tommy screamed, unable to keep the single cry from bursting out. A horrible mix of fear and anger raged in his chest, and he strained against the droids' hold once more. He couldn't *feel* Wilbur. Was this what happened when you had a bond with someone who had died? Or was-

"Scripta, relax," Quackity drawled. He flapped a dismissive hand at Wilbur's limp frame, and Tommy clenched his jaw to keep from screaming again. "He's just passed out. We need him alive, but I can't have you getting all comfortable."

Quackity turned to walk backward, and he flashed Tommy a wide grin. This time, ice crept up Tommy's spine. The gleam in Quackity's eyes was... deranged.

"I already told you, little padawan," the thief purred, and a knife suddenly appeared between the fingers of his right hand. It twirled end over end over end. "The show's about to start. Wouldn't want you to miss it."

Quackity whipped back around with a cheerful giggle. Tommy still wanted to punch the Night Thief until his stupid face was black and blue, but... fear was starting to corrupt his anger. He didn't want to fight anymore. He just wanted to escape.

So, even though Tommy felt like throwing up, he cast his gaze around. They'd left the tight and winding hallway behind, and now, he was being herded down a long walkway squeezed between the wall and gigantic machinery. The ceiling towered above them.

At first, Tommy had thought they were in a prison. Now, the empty spaces, oily machinery, and raised walkways reminded him of the merchant warehouses he and Wilbur had visited before. Except... abandoned.

He really, really hoped that Dream was coming. There was no easy way out.

Quackity suddenly swung around a corner, waving for the droids to follow him, and Tommy was jerked in a 90-degree turn. One of the droids trod over Tommy's foot, and he bit back a hissed curse. He blinked a few times, clearing the tears from his eyes, then looked up.

His heart froze.

A gigantic main floor stretched before him. Across the way, a winding staircase led up to a room with blacked-out windows, and machinery dotted the landscape. But none of that mattered, because the floor itself didn't exist. It dropped at least sixty feet straight down, and at the bottom, massive vents gaped in perfect rows. The air above the vents seemed to shimmer, and the meager walkways stretching over the vents looked like they were draped in some sort of miasma.

Quackity suddenly glanced over at him, and the thief's face split in a brilliant grin. "Crazy, huh?" he chuckled. Tommy realized that his jaw had dropped open, and he hurriedly shut his mouth. "No, no, be impressed. It's *impressive*. This used to be a factory, and we repurposed it."

It didn't look like any kind of factory Tommy had ever seen. There was supposed to be machinery and windows and bright, amber light panels casting a cheerful glow over all the workers. Not a literal death field.

“Of course, this is how Underworld factories look,” Quackity added absently, tossing his knife in the air and catching it without a glance. “Can't imagine how Foolish got the permits to put a layer of lava in Coruscant's crust.”

This time, a question bubbled out before Tommy could stop it. “Lava?” he asked faintly.

A smirk turned the corners of Quackity's lips. “Yeah. You didn't think the vents filtered the air from hot coals or some shit, did you?”

Tommy swallowed and kept his mouth shut. Quackity chuckled and turned back to the main floor, surveying it with something almost like fondness.

The next ten minutes were the worst Tommy had ever experienced. Silence stretched through the room, with only the occasional *whoomph* as a vent coughed out another billowing cloud of hot air. While the idle time was stressful as all shit, it also gave Tommy a glimmer of hope. If Quackity waited long enough, then maybe Dream would show up. Maybe he and Wilbur could get out of here without-

Something across the way clicked.

Tommy's heart sank, and he watched, horrified, as a door leading to the room with blacked-out windows swung open wide. A person stepped out, closed the door, and started down the steps. Before Tommy could make out the person's facial features, Quackity drove a playful elbow into his side.

“C'mon, Tommy!” the thief said brightly, skipping out onto the walkways. “That's our cue!”

The two droids holding Tommy lurched forward. All Tommy could do was try not to hyperventilate.

Quackity led the precession out to the very middle of the floor. He darted around with nimbleness and confidence that made Tommy's head spin – and when Tommy glanced at the vents below, bile burned his throat. The vents were uncovered. Huge, metal grates had turned on their sides, leaving the “layer of lava” beneath the vents completely exposed. Tommy didn't look down again after that.

Finally, Quackity clapped his hands. “Here is good!” he called, turning to face the droids. “Then, uh- do the- do the security thing.”

The droids immediately dumped Wilbur onto the walkway, then lumbered off in different directions. Tommy only had time to straighten his legs before he, too, was dropped, and he stumbled on the landing. With a growing sense of horror, Tommy realized the walkways swayed slightly in the currents from the vents.

“Wilbur,” he croaked. No answer. Tommy shuffled towards his master, only to be met with another sway and a wave of nausea. “Oh, Holy fucking Kantos. Will. Will, can you hear me?”

Quackity waved a hand at Wilbur's still body, then started off after one of the droids. “You can go over to him,” he called encouragingly, shouting the words over his shoulder. “I won't stop you!”

Tommy waited until Quackity was barely visible. Then he dashed forward, throwing caution to the wind and skidding to his knees next to Wilbur. The taller man's eyes were shut, but his chest rose and fell steadily. Tommy let out a shaky breath. Alright. Quackity hadn't been lying; Wilbur was still alive. But what now? Quackity had four droids at his control, and Tommy wasn't strong enough to-



“Ah, so these are our guests. Welcome to my factory. It's probably a little different than you imagined, huh?”

The voice cut through the heat like a frigid knife, plunging into Tommy's chest and freezing his blood in his veins. He'd talked to a lot of Jedi Masters in his life. Most had chastised him in one way or another, and every single one had sounded stern and commanding. But never in his life had a voice so silky smooth filled Tommy with such raw dread.

“Don't be shy, little padawan. Look up at your host.”

Tommy did.

A huge man stood on the walkway ahead of him, hands shoved in his trouser pockets. He wore a white collared shirt with its sleeves rolled up to his elbows, pressed slacks, and shiny shoes. Brown hair was neatly pushed back over ram's horns, and near-black eyes watched Tommy with sharp intelligence.

But worst of all was the man's smile. It was easy and polite, yet it made Tommy feel like he'd lost a gamble on his entire life.

“There you go,” the man chuckled, and he spread his arms. “It's a pleasure to meet you, Padawan Thomas. In case you haven't already figured it out, my name is Aries. That-” Aries turned to wave at Quackity, who had perched on one of the nearby machines. “-beautiful creature is Quackity. And I want you to know our names because there's a good chance that you won't make it out of this factory alive.”

Aries's smile widened. Tommy couldn't breathe.

“How long do we have, Quackity?” Aries called. He strode off of the walkway and stepped back onto the strip of solid floor surrounding the vents. “I don't want to leave our guests waiting for too long.”

Quackity clicked his tongue. “The Jedi haven't shown up on the outside camera, and I haven't heard any explosions, so I guess Dream is slow off the start today.”

“What a shame. Eh, I guess our bait will just be a little well-done.”

*Well-done*, Tommy thought, and a hysterical giggle broke through his fear. *Well-done. Wilbur and I are gonna be fucking cooked alive.*

Wilbur's hand suddenly twitched, and Tommy glanced sharply at his master, silently pleading for Wilbur to wake up, *just wake up*. But he didn't. The taller man just twitched and jerked like he always did when asleep.

“Come on, you stubborn piece of shit,” Tommy mumbled. He shuffled a little closer to his master, carefully resting Wilbur's head against his leg. “You promised me. You said you'd protect me.”

And at that moment, Tommy realized just how small he really was.

He'd grown up an orphan, taken in by the Jedi Order as a kid and raised without a biological family. He never learned if his family was dead or if he'd been kidnapped. It probably didn't matter, since no one had ever come looking for him.

At 8 years old, a Jedi Master had chosen Tommy as a padawan, interested in cultivating his special connection with the Force. He'd been discarded by his ninth birthday.

Tommy had basically played a game of human pinball for the next three years, tossed around from master to master like a hot potato no one wanted to get stuck with. By the time he turned 12, Tommy had started to wonder if he should leave the Order.

Then he'd bumped into Wilbur.

Literally. Tommy had accidentally dropped his training lightsaber, and in his haste to pick it up, he'd rammed right into Wilbur. At 12 years old, he hadn't given a shit about the Jedi Master he'd hit and, unsurprisingly, had gotten irritated when a man much taller than him snatched his lightsaber away. Thus had begun a shouting match that lasted until two other Jedi Masters came to break it up.

Tommy had been assigned to Wilbur a week later. The masters in charge of it had claimed the two of them had "compatible personalities," though Tommy had assumed it was just more bullshit to get him out of other people's hair.

But Wilbur hadn't dropped him. Wilbur had taken him in, pushed him out of his comfort zone, and argued about every bad habit Tommy had. They'd fought, debated, trained, and meditated, and three years later, Tommy had realized he still had a master.

Sure, he didn't know all that much about the Force. And sure, his "incredible gift," so highly praised by all the other Jedi Masters, had gone untouched. Wilbur had always said he considered it "part of you, not the other way around. You aren't your gift."

Tommy blinked, and suddenly, he realized he was crying. His tears dried as soon as they fell, thanks to the air billowing around him, but his shoulders trembled uncontrollably.

"Come on, Will," Tommy whispered. "I can't get off this fucking planet without you. We have- we have to get out of here, together."

Tommy had never really considered that, in the fallout of the war between the Jedi Order and Aries, Wilbur might die. Tommy had always worried that *he* would die first; *he* would be targeted; *he* would be the first casualty.

But what if it was Wilbur? What if Dream and the other Jedi came to save them, and Tommy got out, but Wilbur didn't?

Tommy couldn't sleep in Wilbur's room anymore. He'd never hear Wilbur's voice in his head again, chiding him for mentally cussing out someone who'd pissed him off. Tommy would get passed around like an unwanted piece of clothing until he was finally old enough to take his trials.

He couldn't live with that.

"T-Tommy?"

The voice plunged through Tommy's chest like a javelin. It sliced through all his thoughts, leaving him with only basic mental functions and a feeling akin to weightlessness. He knew that voice. *He knew that voice.* He whirled around, filled with equal parts terror and hope. There was no fucking way, but- but-

It was. Tubbo stood on solid ground to Tommy's left, staring at Tommy with wide, frantic eyes. He slouched awkwardly, his clothes torn and bloodied, but he was *alive*.

"Tubbo!" Tommy shouted back. He scrambled to his feet, then instantly froze as the walkways swayed beneath him. "Tubbo! Oh, gods, you're alive! Oh, fuck, I- I thought you were-"

And then, Tommy's rambling came to a grinding stop. He'd thought Tubbo was going to die. His best friend had all but said that, with his vague answers and his request to deliver a message. Yet here Tubbo was, glancing between Tommy and Aries.

Tubbo was a traitor, wasn't he? He'd turned on the Order, turned on *Tommy*, and now- he'd lied to their faces, hadn't he? He'd acted so miserable, so *hopeless*, and for what? For Tommy and Wilbur to give up? For them to crack faster since they knew a dear friend had already "died"? Aries was an Underworld boss. If he'd wanted to kill Tubbo, he would have done it.

He would have done it.

Tubbo was a traitor.

The other boy began hobbling towards the walkways, but Tommy threw out a hand. "No!" he roared. "I thought you were fucking dead! You- you *told* me you were going to die! You lied to me!"

Tubbo stumbled to a stop. He seemed to sway on his feet, but Tommy attributed that to the heat haze wafting from the vents.

"I thought I was dead, too!" Tubbo shouted back. His voice cracked on the "too," and his eyes pleaded for Tommy to listen. "Listen, Tommy, I can-"

"No!"

The single word tore from Tommy's throat like it belonged to someone else. His head was starting to pound, either from the heat or stress or some combination of the two, and he dropped back to Wilbur's side. His master's cheeks were pale.

Tommy squeezed his eyes shut and prayed that Dream hurried up. He repeated that prayer over and over and over, lifting it up to whatever god was willing to listen to him. Faintly, he heard Aries and Quackity talking, but Tommy barely even registered the words.

"Tubbo clawed his way out of the bacta tank, huh? I guess it was older than you thought, Quackity."

"Guess so. Damn, I even checked all the seals."

"Don't worry about it, pumpkin. He's still half-dead as it is. We only need two for negotiation, and kids are always more valuable. Go over there and kill the tall guy. Rough up the blond one if you have to."

That Tommy heard. His eyes snapped open, and he looked up in time to see Quackity slip around the droid standing guard at the head of the walkway. The thief walked assuredly, absently twiddling that same fucking knife.

Anger roared to life in Tommy's ears.

"Get the fuck away from us!" he bellowed, standing protectively over Wilbur's body.

Quackity rolled his eyes but didn't slow down. Tommy's mind raced, scanning his surroundings. He and Wilbur had been stripped of their lightsabers, and Quackity had at least one knife. There was no way Tommy could beat him in hand-to-hand combat, so that left only one option.

Tommy took a deep, deep breath.

*Remember, it's not about power. It's about control. You can't brute force your way through everything, you fucking idiot.*

The Force lapped at his fingertips, asking what he commanded of it.

*The masters have probably told you that you aren't supposed to use the Force when you're emotional, right? That's bullshit. That's fucking bullshit. You're human, so as long as you're alive, you're going to feel emotions. Just acknowledge them and move on.*

Tommy was angry. He was so fucking angry, and he just wanted everyone to back the fuck up. But more than that, he wanted to protect Wilbur.

*When you're ready, let it out. Even if you weren't fucking overpowered, Jedi are the Force equivalent of a superconductor. You have the power.*

He let it out.

The Force gathered around Tommy's hands for just a moment before it exploded away from him in a shockwave, rippling the walkways and forming a sphere of cool air. Tommy gasped in relief as his skin finally stopped burning. He watched in disbelief as Quackity was bucked, then tossed back towards Aries. The mob boss caught the thief, but Tommy still grinned wildly.

It worked. It had *worked*. Somehow, despite the weird void that the factory existed in, Tommy had used the Force! It would be easy to stay safe until Dream showed up, then! All he had to do-

An oppressive hand landed on Tommy's mind and all but crushed him to the ground. He let out a pained cry and collapsed to his knees, shuddering next to Wilbur. His cocoon of blissfully cool air vanished. The heat sucked his triumph, relief, and breath, and Tommy was left gasping.

“Quackity, baby, are you hurt?”

“No, no, I'm fucking fine. Scripta, the kid's strong enough to break the cat's shields.”

“...he is, isn't he? Alright. We're gonna kill both of them and use Tubbo as leverage. Less variables makes it easier. Send the droids this time. I don't want you to get hurt.”

Tommy heard the words, and he knew he should prop himself up, see if he could conjure another Force burst. But he was exhausted. The mental hand holding him down was choking him, and the Force felt as far away as memories of winter. He couldn't stop this anymore.

He and Wilbur were going to die.

“Quackity, I told you to send the droids.”

“I did! I'm trying! Look, it's not- look!”

“It- why isn't it fucking working? Did you reset the system?”

“I tried that!”

Hope touched Tommy's heart. He knew he was an idiot for even considering it, but... what else would cause the droids to malfunction? They'd worked perfectly fifteen minutes ago when Quackity had dragged him and Wilbur out of their cell. Had Dream showed up? Were they saved?

The lights in the factory suddenly switched from blue to red, and with a high-pitched beep, deafening alarms began wailing from every angle. The sound pierced right through Tommy's brain,

and he screamed, pressing his face against Wilbur's shoulder.

“Tommy! *Tommy!*”

The words barely reached Tommy's ears over the wailing, and even then, looking up seemed like an impossible feat. But he did. He forced himself back to his knees, staring at Tubbo through watering eyes.

The other boy had moved. He now stood next to what looked like a control panel on the wall, his whole body trembling. Tubbo's next words were whipped away from the alarms, but Tommy read his best friend's lips.

*I'm sorry.*

Tubbo pressed a button.

Tommy had exactly two seconds to wonder what the fuck Tubbo had done before the walkway beneath him vanished.

The world slowed to nothing. The alarms faded into a distant wail, and Tommy watched as the walkways above him retracted with perfect efficiency. *Hydraulics*, Tommy realized with some detached level of interest. *Neat. It'd be cool if I knew how they worked.*

The air currents buffeting Tommy around flipped him onto his stomach, and suddenly, reality came crashing back in. Tommy's heart pounded against his ribcage, his whole body shook, and his eyes burned.

He and Wilbur were plummeting towards the vents. Wilbur was falling faster, limp as he was, and Tommy couldn't reach him in time.

Tommy... couldn't reach him.

They were falling towards a lake of lava.

They were fucked.

Wilbur suddenly crashed into one of the upright metal grates, pinwheeling through the air like a starfish tossed by an excited kid. In that moment, Tommy's body moved on some instinct he hadn't known existed.

He grabbed Wilbur's arm as he plunged past.

He twisted his body around, so his feet faced the lava.

As he and Wilbur passed the grate and headed towards their deaths, Tommy lifted up one last prayer and flung out a hand.

His fingers caught the lip of the vent.

White-hot pain instantly seared up Tommy's hand, and he screamed at the top of his lungs. Gods, it felt like *his fucking hand was **being melted off!*** All of Tommy's nerves short-circuited, and for a few seconds, all he knew was a repeating loop of agony and nausea and *gods, please, just let go, this hurts too much, I can't bear-*

Something cool wrapped around Tommy's hand, numbing the pain just enough to where he could breathe again. He couldn't muster the strength to open his eyes, but he knew the cool touch. He'd

felt it his whole life. The Force gently infused into Tommy's right hand, soothing the pain and giving him strength.

*If the alarms are going off, someone had to trip them,* it whispered in Tommy's ear.

*Dream's here,* Tommy concluded, barely stringing the concepts together. *I just have to hold on to Wilbur. I just have to keep us here.*

Time stretched like putty. Tommy couldn't tell if the alarms were still going on or even if the lava was still there. His entire body was numb. The only things he was aware of were the lip of the vent and Wilbur's wrist, tightly clasped in his left hand.

And while time stretched, Tommy prayed.

*Please, let us survive.*

A hand latched onto Tommy's wrist.

The touch sent all of Tommy's systems racing back to life, and suddenly, everything was back: his eyesight, his hearing, his sense of touch. His hand was on fire once again, alarms still wailing, and a nauseating smell Tommy clogged his nose. But none of that mattered. Standing above him, with a durasteel hand wrapped around Tommy's wrist, was Philza, eyes blazing and robes billowing.

"Phil," Tommy croaked. Movement blurred in the corner of his eye, and he glanced over. Techno stood next to Phil, jaw set and robes discarded. "Techno." The gravity of the situation hit Tommy like a hammer, and suddenly, he remembered what was weighing him down. "Wilbur!" he screamed, frantically looking between the two Jedi Masters. "Grab Wilbur! I can't fucking- *grab him!*"

Phil and Techno moved in perfect unison. One moment Tommy was still dangling, and the next, he was carefully cradled in Techno's arms, bridal style. Tommy registered gray, then silver, then suddenly, he was staring at the factory's ceiling. Techno still held him tightly, and eventually, Tommy realized the pig Jedi was staring at his hand.

"What?" Tommy slurred. "What's wrong with my fucking hand, bitch?"

Techno glanced at him. The taller man's blood-red eyes narrowed with concern, and even without the Force, Tommy knew the expression all too well. *This is bad.*

Well, it couldn't be all that bad, right? If the Jedi were here, that meant Tommy and Wilbur were saved! So Tommy glanced at his right hand, which was resting across his chest.

Tommy stared.

Then he gagged, and it took all of his willpower not to throw up all over Techno.

His right hand was just... gone. Skin and tissues and- everything. It was a mangled mess of black and red and bones, and *oh gods, Tommy could see his own bones, and his hand had basically melted away-*

"Hey, hey. Don't look at that."

"No shit, bitch," Tommy gasped out.

But he did as Techno ordered and tilted his head back, staring up at the ceiling again. He filed the

fact that his hand was fucking destroyed for a later time and leaned against Techno's chest. The pig Jedi's heartbeat was strong and steady. The sound lulled Tommy towards the darkness of sleep, and suddenly, he was so, so tired.

“Medic! Get a fucking medic in here!”

Phil's voice. Phil's voice, sharp and laced with that edge of panic Tommy only heard when things were really, really fucking bad.

Phil, who had been reaching for Wilbur.

“Techno, what happened?” Tommy croaked, scrabbling at the pig Jedi's robes. Techno's face darkened, and Tommy's insides turned into a bowl of soup. “Techno, what the fuck happened? Techno, please, what's going on?”

Techno looked up, looked back down at Tommy, then back up again, his face screwed into a frown. Finally, Techno turned.

A crowd had formed nearby, clumped around a single focal point. Techno stepped forward, one smooth step at a time, and slowly, the words of the gathered Jedi reached Tommy's ears.

“Did you-”

“Oh, gods, the smell-”

“He'll never be-”

“-and his padawan saved-”

And then, Phil's voice again.

“Where's the gods-damned medic?!”

Tommy's heart shot into his throat.

Techno began shouldering through the crowd, but Tommy's senses again disappeared. All he could do was stare as, with one last push, Techno broke through the crowd. The first thing Tommy registered was that Phil's shoulders were shaking. The next was that Wilbur-

Oh, fuck, *Wilbur*.

His master was missing his legs. Both legs, from the knees down, were gone. Wilbur's robes had been seared away, too, and slowly, Tommy realized what he was smelling.

Burnt flesh. Wilbur had lost his legs in the lava.

*No*, Tommy thought blankly. *No, that can't- that can't happen. Wilbur never gets hurt. Even when we fight, he doesn't get hurt.*

Phil suddenly straightened, straining to look over his shoulder. “Where's that fucking medic?” he bellowed, and the fear lacing his voice was undeniable. “He's barely breathing! I don't-” Phil looked around, and his eyes met Tommy's. The Jedi Master's face crumpled. “*Tommy.*”

Tommy's heart stuttered once, twice. Then wild energy coursed through him, and he wriggled in Techno's arms. “Put me down,” he pleaded frantically. “Gods, please, Techno, put me down. I need- I need-”

What did Tommy need? He didn't even know. But Techno lowered him to the ground all the same, and Tommy flopped forward in desperate lunges, using his one good hand to haul himself to Wilbur's side. Up close, his master looked even worse. Wilbur's face was as pale as ash, and the smell from his legs was nearly unbearable.

Tommy collapsed across Wilbur's chest.

He might have started crying. He was also vaguely aware of sobs shaking his whole body, either out of anger, fear, or betrayal. He was definitely aware that when someone who wasn't Techno touched his shoulder, Tommy screamed at the top of his lungs, “*Don't fucking touch me!*”

All Tommy was aware of was Wilbur's heartbeat, faint and fluttery beneath his ear.

Memories flittered through his head – everything Wilbur had ever done for him, and everything Wilbur would never get to see if he died on this fucking floor.

If he died because Tubbo had dropped them into the lava.

Pressure built in Tommy's chest. It gathered until he could barely breathe, then crawled up into his mouth and burst out as a scream that tore Tommy's throat.

He couldn't even hear himself.

*Wilbur can't die.*

---

Clay didn't really understand how George hacked into the system. He made a silent promise to give the shorter man his proper dues at a later date, but as George repelled down from the rafters and explained everything he'd done, Clay only heard one thing:

*Get to Tubbo faster.*

Clay wasn't even sure when Philza and Techno had taken over the raid. He knew the Council would probably kick his ass as soon as they got back, but, staring up at the factory, Clay hadn't been able to get his head straight. All he'd been able to process was the horrifying void engulfing the building. No Force presences. No life signatures. No sign of Tubbo.

A half an hour after they'd made it to the factory, the parties were dispatched. Clay only paid attention when Philza made it to the last two assignments.

“Eret, Rhodys,” the Jedi Master called, waving the two over. “You're going after Antfrost. Eret, I trust you can sense him out?”

Eret's shoulders rose and fell silently. “Philza, I can't see without the Force,” he said tiredly. “I can barely see *you* right now. I can sort of feel him, but as soon as I can go in there, I will be a sitting duck.”

Clay's brain was more or less a loop of *Find Tubbo, find Tubbo, find Tubbo*, but what remained of his coherency offered him a small nugget of advice. “Don't you have a photographic memory?” Clay asked. He instantly winced at how scratchy his voice sounded, and his friends also shot him a surprised look. He must have been out of it for longer than he realized.

Eret, however, didn't seem phased. “Somewhat,” he admitted. “How does that help?”



“Maybe you could stand out here and grab Antfrost's Force presence, then just remember its location,” Clay suggested hesitantly. “He shouldn't move that much.” He wasn't exactly sure why Philza wanted Eret and Rhodys to find Antfrost. Since the cat Jedi was part of the task force, he must have come along. Maybe he'd just wandered off.

Eret glanced at Philza. The look exchanged between them was charged, tense in a way Clay didn't understand. Then Eret nodded once, solemnly, and tapped Rhodys's arm. The two of them sprinted towards the far side of the factory.

Clay watched them go with a frown. He was missing something.

“Alright, listen up.”

Philza's sharp command brought Clay's attention back to the factory, but he couldn't focus on the Jedi Master's orders. The blackmetal factory loomed over them. It looked even more monstrous in the setting sun, and the gigantic rolling doors seemed uncomfortably like a monstrous set of teeth.

Somewhere in the belly of that monster, Tubbo was being held hostage. Hell itself could raise its fiercest warriors, but none of them would be enough to keep Clay from his padawan. Nothing was going to fucking stop him.

“Clay. Breathe.”

A hand landed on Clay's arm, jolting him from the fire and brimstone raging in his mind. He glanced over, startled, and found George watching him worriedly.

“I am breathing,” Clay protested. His voice sounded dull, even to his own ears, and guilt touched his heart as George frowned. “I'll be fine. I just want to find Tubbo.”

A shadow crossed George's face. Then it disappeared, and the shorter man turned towards Philza once more. It was then that Clay realized he hadn't heard a single word, but Philza was already jogging towards the huge rolling doors, lifting them with the Force.

*Shit*, Clay thought desperately. *I should have been listening!*

No time for self-doubt. All he could do now was follow along and pray that Philza hadn't assigned him a crucial task. But, even if Clay somehow completely fucked up... they would be fine. Their little party consisted of Philza, Techno, Nick, George, and himself. The five of them could deal with anything Aries threw at them.

They had to.

Philza raised the rolling doors all the way, and the full force of the factory hit Clay right in the face. The hallway before them was grimy and oily, with leaky pipes running across the ceiling and heat wafting from deeper within. The most prominent thing, though, was what the factory lacked.

The Force was nowhere to be found. Clay shuffled beyond the threshold, then gasped his connection shut off. He was completely isolated. Never in his life had he heard of null spots existing *anywhere*.

Of course, unless it wasn't a null spot. Clay and George had specifically asked Kan Bo Salem about advanced Force techniques, and they knew the traitor was a Jedi.

Where had Ant gone?

Clay whipped around and found the rest of his friends standing in the setting sun, gathered around George. “Where the fuck is Antfrost? he shouted.

Somewhere deep within himself, Clay prayed to Tibulta that he was being paranoid. He was stressed and anxious (even he could admit that), and maybe, just maybe, he'd connected the dots the wrong way.

But George and Nick instantly shared a guilty look, Techno stiffened, and Philza's lips pressed into a thin line. The first thing Clay felt was sadness. He'd drifted away from Antfrost a lot since George's exile. He'd never asked how his old friend felt, never reached out. If Antfrost had been tempted by the Dark Side or simply snapped, Clay wouldn't have known.

Then the sadness began to wash away. It was replaced by the emotion that had gotten Clay into trouble for years, starting when he was a kid and leading all the way up to the current time.

Anger.

“Why the fuck did no one tell me we suspected a fucking friend of being the traitor?” Clay shouted, throwing his arms wide. Part of his brain pleaded for him to just stop; they had Tubbo to worry about. But that worm of anger just wouldn't let go. “Don't you think I should have fucking known that a *friend* of mine is the traitor?!”

Silence hung over the hallway. Clay's shoulders heaved, and already, he was regretting his outburst. Philza's eyes had hardened, and Techno looked ready to walk right past him. Finally, Nick broke the tense quiet.

“It's because you always fucking do this!” he called. Again, anger was Clay's first reaction, but Nick threw up his hands. “No, no, just shut the fuck up for a second!” the shorter man ordered. “Yeah, we think Ant is a traitor. Makes sense if you *think* about it. And you wanna know who else we suspect? Tubbo. Your own fucking padawan is a turncoat, Clay.”

Clay blinked once, twice.

*Processing.*

*Processing.*

*Processing.*

*Oh.*

What Clay hated the most was that it made sense. Once, a few months ago, he could have refuted that statement and meant every word of it. But... could he say the same now? Tubbo had been twitchy, closed-off. Clay couldn't even remember the last time he'd felt anything from his padawan.

And Tubbo hadn't told him that he'd been kidnapped. He hadn't even mentioned the factory by name; Clay had just felt the residual echo and gotten a general picture of where Tubbo was. The boy had explicitly asked for help.

*“Dream! Dream, save me!”*

“No,” Clay croaked aloud.

*You fucking idiot!* his brain shouted, and Clay was inclined to agree with it. *If all of your friends believe it, maybe there's some truth to it! And you know you're a temperamental son of a bitch!*

*They didn't tell you because they knew you'd waste time like you're doing right now!*

“It can't be Tubbo,” Clay's mouth continued weakly, even as he begged himself to quit while he was ahead.

Nick scoffed, and just like that, the trance was broken. Clay's body shook, but he couldn't bring himself to move. If he moved, that was acknowledging he'd made an irreparable mistake. It was acknowledging that he'd failed in being a master and that he'd made all the worst choices when it came to his tutelage.

How else would he drive his padawan to turn on the Order?

“Look, Dream, we might be wrong,” Philza said quietly. “But we need to get moving. Get out of your own fucking head and guard our rear.”

Clay nodded numbly. Philza nodded once in return, then swept past him, already shouting for George to “disable those droids! We need a clean shot to the main floor!” Techno didn't look at him, nor did Nick. But just before George passed him, the shorter man shot Clay a worried look. Then he too was gone.

*Great job*, an exhausted voice in the back of Clay's head muttered. *Your friends hate you.*

*I'll deal with that later*, Clay decided, and he turned, jogging after the rest of his party.

The factory seemed to engulf them as they ran. George shouted instructions and directions from somewhere in front of him, but Clay paid the engineer no mind. He clicked himself into battle mode and refused to let himself focus on anything except a potential threat.

But every droid they passed was offline, and every trap was either disengaged or skillfully avoided, thanks to George.

For a few minutes, Clay started to relax. Maybe it would be as simple as walking in and getting their friends.

Then George shouted, “Aries joined Wilbur, Tommy, and Quackity on the main floor!” and all of Clay's hopes shattered into a million tiny pieces.

“He what?” Clay shouted at the shorter man.

George glanced back at him, and something like pity flashed through his dark eyes. He fell back next to Clay, holding out his holopad wordlessly. It projected a blown-up live feed of the factory itself. It was a nightmarish scene, with thin walkways stretching over what looked like an entrance to hell. But the worst part was the players.

Wilbur was collapsed on one of the walkways, Tommy hunched next to him. On the far right side of the screen, facing away from the camera, was a tall, muscular man and a thin, lean figure.

The lean figure was recognizable as Quackity, thanks to his outfit. The other had to be Aries.

“How did Wilbur and Tommy get there?” Clay asked, and he hated the ragged edge of his voice. “Where even is that? Is this in the factory someplace?”

George frowned. “I explained it early. I-” He cut himself off with an apologetic look, and the ball of shame and self-hate sitting in the pit of Clay's stomach grew heavier. “This is the main floor of the factory,” George explained, “and Wilbur and Tommy came on-screen about ten minutes ago.

Quackity brought them here using these super high-tech droids. Aries just got here, and-

The light panels in the hallway suddenly shut off, and Clay stumbled to a startled halt. His friends didn't even have time to clamor before the overheads turned back on. But this time, they weren't pale blue. They were a dark, angry red. And with the lights came piercing sirens, wailing like banshees.

“Shit!” Philza shouted over the cacophony. “What the fuck happened?”

*“Antfrost's running, Philza!”* Rhodys's voice answered, echoing around the hallway. *“He must have tripped an alarm we didn't know about!”*

*“He's heading deeper into the factory,”* Eret added, his voice strained. *“His shields are gone, but I don't know how long we have! Move!”*

Philza cast them a wild look. “Go!” he bellowed.

Clay ran. His legs pumped, and suddenly, he'd outstripped his friends and was running ahead of them. The Force once again thrummed through his veins, and Clay reached out with everything he had.

The supporting parties of Jedi surrounded the factory, slowly converging. On the main floor itself, two faint shimmers belonged to Aries and Quackity, and bright blue and warm amber signified Tommy and Wilbur.

And tucked to the far left of the main floor was a bright green Force presence, shaky and unsteady, but undeniably *there*.

“Tubbo,” Clay breathed. “Oh, thank the gods. You're still alive.”

*“Tubbo just showed up in the camera's range! Wait, he- oh, my fucking gods. Oh my- Tubbo just dropped Wilbur and Tommy **into the fucking vents!**”*

George's shriek cut through Clay's very core. He stumbled and tripped, and for a horrible moment, all he could do was stare down at the oily floor. Was Tubbo really a traitor? Had Clay fucked up so badly that he'd ruined an incredibly talented kid? Had someone else convinced Tubbo that the Dark Side held more promise? Had it been Antfrost? Quackity? Aries himself?

Clay caught himself, balanced, and dashed forward. His body was moving by itself, charging towards the main floor like a man possessed.

Who cared what had done it? Even if Tubbo wanted to kill them all, maybe there was a chance that Wilbur and Tommy were still alive. And, if they weren't... Aries and Quackity were in there. Clay could kill them.

A small part of his mind nervously noted that he shouldn't be so ready to kill someone. Clay disregarded it with a snarl.

Five minutes later, Clay swung around a corner and finally found the main floor waiting at the end of it. He gritted his teeth and charged even faster. His padawan was at the end of this hallway. His friends were there, and his worst enemies were there. Regardless of how this went down, Clay wasn't leaving without dealing with one of the three.

Then Clay burst out of the hallway and skidded to a halt.

The scene had changed from the one George's holopad had displayed. Aries, Quackity, and Tubbo had all disappeared, and the four droids guarding the entrance to the walkways were toppled on their sides.

Speaking of the walkways... the metal pathways were gone. In their place was an electric field that crackled over the gigantic abyss of a main floor.

Four familiar presences rushed up behind Clay, and he frantically glanced over his shoulder, trying to look at all of his friends at once. "Look!" he ordered, waving wildly at the electric field. "This wasn't here before!"

"I don't care about a stupid electric barrier!" Techno bellowed, launching himself over the railing. Philza followed his partner with a shout of, "George, get rid of the fucking field! Tommy and Wilbur are still down there!"

George went deathly pale. With three quick taps, the field disappeared. Philza and Techno didn't even hesitate before they threw themselves into the abyss. George's fingers flew over his holopad again, and this time, the walkways extended.

Clay watched the unfolding scene with only one thought in his head. "If that field wasn't there before," he mumbled, more to himself than to George or Nick, "then maybe Tubbo wasn't trying to kill them. Maybe he was trying to save them. If they'd stayed on those walkways, they would have been electrocuted, right?"

George didn't respond, but Nick's eyes lit up.

"Yeah," the shorter man said, and his face regained a few shades of color. "Yeah. If Tubbo hadn't dropped them, there's no way they would have survived, right?"

"But what if they're dead?" George asked softly.

That punched through Clay's optimism like an arrow through an apple. Tubbo might have had good intentions, but Wilbur and Tommy had been dropped into what looked like hell's front gates. If they were dead...

Something else suddenly crashed into the main floor, interrupting Clay's growing dread and sending his mind reeling. Three powerful Force presences burst out of the western wing of the factory. As Clay watched, Antfrost darted out from between old machines, racing towards the opposite side of the room. Eret and Rhodys trailed close behind, but once Antfrost leaped onto the metal walkways, it became clear that the cat Jedi knew his way around. Eret and Rhodys stumbled and slowed.

Clay's anger returned in full force. Antfrost was running. Antfrost had been a friend, and now, he was fleeing from the scene of his own fucking mess.

"*Someone get him!*" Rhodys shouted desperately. "*I can't keep up!*"

Clay glanced over at Nick, and for the first time in years, he felt Nick's Force presence as strong as a miniature sun.

*We fucking catch him*, Clay thought.

*We fucking catch him*, Nick agreed.

They both dove over the railing and took chase after their old friend.

It was a tricky job. Clay and Nick avoided the main floor at all costs, but it slowed their progress. Antfrost had already disappeared by the time Clay and Nick made it across the main floor. However, the cat Jedi had left a trail for them to follow. Grimy paw-prints led up a tight staircase, and at the top, the paw-prints led right into a luxurious office.

“This must be Aries's,” Nick noted, scowling darkly as he glanced around. “We're gonna get a gold mine of information from his shit.”

Clay didn't answer. Antfrost's paw-prints led directly to a section of wall, and he frowned, stepping closer. Carefully, he reached out a hand. It phased right through the supposedly solid blackmetal panel.

“Holographic,” Clay reported, and Nick appeared at his shoulder. “Must be an escape tunnel. We should-”

“*Dream, Sapnap.*” Eret's voice appeared in Clay's earpiece, and he froze. “*We found Tubbo. He's pretty shaken up.*”

*Tubbo!* part of Clay's brain screamed. *We have to go see him! We have to make sure he's okay!*

*We can't!* argued back another part. *We have to catch Antfrost!*

Clay shot Nick a pained look, but, to his surprise, the shorter man didn't look torn. In fact, he was smiling faintly.

Nick took a deep breath, then rested a hand on Clay's shoulder. “Go to your padawan,” he urged quietly. Clay inhaled to protest, but Nick clamped a hand over his mouth. “Don't be a fucking idiot,” the shorter man muttered. “He's *your* padawan. I'm just-” Nick cut himself off sharply, then continued with more confidence. “I'll catch Ant. I promise.”

Clay wanted to protest. He wanted to give Nick backup, to help the younger man as a small payment for the thousands of times Nick hadn't just punched him for his stupidity. But his best friend's eyes were steely, and Clay knew he couldn't go.

“Be safe,” he croaked after carefully removing Nick's hand.

Nick's face softened. “Yeah, yeah. I'm not dumb. Go.”

Clay did.

He turned and flew out of Aries's office, back down the stairs, and towards the other end of the main floor. A crowd had gathered on the floor, but Clay ignored that for the time being. He scanned for brown hair, green robes, and-

There. Standing awkwardly by a nearby control panel, shoulders slumped, was Tubbo.

Clay's heart swelled. “Tubbo!” he bellowed, charging towards his padawan.

Tubbo's head immediately snapped up, and a million and one emotions flashed across his face. “Dream!” he shouted back. Clay skidded to a stop in front of the brown-haired boy, and tears gathered in Tubbo's eyes. “Dream, you're- you're here. You-you heard me.”

“Of course I did,” Clay said, somewhat breathlessly. Now that he was closer, Tubbo looked... bad. He slouched awkwardly, his nose looked broken, and he clutched his left arm, which was severely disfigured. “What- what happened?”

Tubbo flinched as if physically struck. “I, uh- I got beat up. Bad. And then I broke out of a bacta tank.”

“What?”

“Yeah, it-” Tubbo inhaled deeply, and suddenly, fear overtook his Force presence (which was unshielded, Clay noted with immense relief). “I’m assuming you know,” his padawan said slowly, angling his broken body away from Clay. “You know, right? I... I betrayed the Order. I’m one of the traitors.”

Clay stared at his padawan for a moment. The scene teleported him four years into the past, back when he’d ambushed George in his room after learning about his best friend’s allotted exile. They looked exactly the same – they were even the same age. They looked scared, cornered, afraid that Clay would hurt them in ways worse than the punishment they’d just been given.

The first time, that had been true.

Clay let out a watery laugh, and he slowly approached his padawan. “I don’t give a shit about that,” he said, unable to stifle another shaky chuckle, and he waved a hand at Tubbo’s arm. “What hurts?”

Tubbo frowned, clearly bewildered. “What?”

“What hurts? What’s still injured?”

“Oh. Uh-” Tubbo rolled both shoulders, then shook his legs. “Just my left arm,” he reported dutifully. “The bones are still shattered, and it might be dislocated. And, uh... my nose. And maybe a rib or two.”

Clay ran through that list for a second. “Okay.”

He stepped forward and scooped his padawan up in his arms, cradling Tubbo to his chest. It was the closer Clay could get to a hug without furthering any of Tubbo’s injuries, and he’d been damned if he kept his padawan at arm’s length after all the shit he’d been through.

*It’s okay*, Clay thought. He gently wove a few new strings into his and Tubbo’s bond, which was in tatters from months of disrepair. *It’s okay, Tubbo. I’m here now, I promise. Aries is never gonna touch you again. He’ll never get through me.*

For a long, long minute, Tubbo didn’t react. He stared at a point at the ceiling, tense and stiff. Then, slowly, he melted. He collapsed against Clay’s chest, burying his face and clinging to Clay’s robes with his good hand. After another few seconds, Clay heard soft sobs.

*I thought I was dead*, Tubbo whispered through their bond. The emotions pouring into Clay’s mind were overwhelming, but they also put him more at peace than he’d been for years. *You can’t even imagine what it was like.*

*I don’t*, Clay agreed, though the words made his heart ache. *But you can tell me.*

Tubbo pulled his face away from Clay’s shoulder, and suddenly, Clay was struck by the fact that his padawan was just 16. Tubbo was only a kid, and he’d endured more than most elder Jedi would in their entire lives. Tubbo’s face was lined, and his icy eyes looked years older than his age.

In that moment, Clay made a decision.

“Take off my mask,” he ordered gently.

Tubbo flinched again, but this time, it seemed to be out of surprise rather than fear. “Why?” he asked hesitantly. “Everyone's here, and-”

Clay cut off his padawan with a quiet *tsk*. “I don't give a fuck about 'everyone,’” he said, though he never lost his warm smile. “Take it off. It's about time I stopped hiding behind it, anyway.”

The implications of that simple sentence Clay would address later. For the time being, he just watched, fondness coursing through his veins, as Tubbo reached up and reverently removed his mask. Clay used the Force to pop the magnets from their places behind his ears, but he decided not to tell Tubbo that.

“What do I do with it?” Tubbo asked, staring at the mask he held.

Clay started to shrug before he remembered he couldn't do that with a boy in his arms. “Drop it,” he offered. “Not in the lava because I am not getting close to that, but... just let it go.”

Tubbo shifted his gaze from the mask to Clay. Clay met the boy's gaze evenly, and even though it was stupid, he basked in the simple joy that he could hear his padawan's voice in his head. It had been too long since he and Tubbo had had a proper bond. Too long since Clay had let all of his issues get in the way.

“Okay,” Tubbo whispered. And he dropped the mask.

“Good,” Clay said soothingly once the mask had clattered to the ground. He gently nudged Tubbo back into his chest, and the boy went willingly, closing his eyes and curling into Clay's arms. Clay sent a few tendrils of peace and serenity through their bond, and Tubbo instantly sank towards darkness. The poor boy was exhausted. “Get some sleep, Tubbo. You're safe.”

Tubbo mumbled unintelligibly, but through their bond, Clay heard his padawan's words.

*Safe. I'm safe.*

Then Tubbo was asleep, his chest rising and falling. A few ribs were still clearly broken, and a cursory glance at Tubbo's left arm proved that he still needed a few hours in a bacta tank. But Clay had his padawan back. And that was all he cared about.

“Dream?”

Clay turned instinctively at the call, and he found Techno striding towards him. The pig Jedi spared just a moment to glance at Clay's face, then his gaze shifted to Tubbo. Clay spared a silent moment to appreciate Techno's situational tact.

“Is he alive?” Techno asked quietly.

Clay nodded. “Needs a bit of healing, but I'll let him sleep until we get back to the Temple.” Techno nodded absently, and worry twisted Clay's gut. “Wilbur and Tommy?”

The lines around Techno's eyes tightened. “Both alive,” he said, but his voice was strained. “Tommy's hand is destroyed. He's probably gonna need a prosthetic. And Wilbur...” Techno ran a hand over his face, and when he looked at Clay again, his eyes were dull. “He's barely alive, Dream. Two amputations, heat exhaustion, and a bad concussion. I don't know if he's going to make it back to the Temple.”

Bands wrapped around Clay's lungs until he struggled to breathe. “Okay,” he murmured. “Okay. A medic is on the way, right?” Techno nodded. “Then we'll get him back as soon as possible. How's



Tommy doing?"

"What do you think?"

Clay winced. Fair enough. "Okay. I guess we're stuck hoping and praying. Are we heading out now?"

"Yeah. Phil let Sapnap know, so he'll come back whenever he catches Antfrost." With that, Techno turned and headed back towards the crowd (which, as Clay now realized, was surrounding Wilbur). But as the pig Jedi walked away, Clay heard him mutter, "Hope and pray. There's no gods listening to us."

A heavy sigh built in Clay's chest, but he tamped it down for the time being. He closed his eyes, steadied himself against the wall, and rested his head against Tubbo's. The boy's Force presence glowed brightly in his mind.

Despite everything, Clay finally had his padawan back.

## Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading! If you feel so inclined (as I have no doubt y'all have lots of feelings about this chapter hbhsbhs), please leave a comment and let me know what you thought!!

I'd like to take a moment here to thank each and every one of you who read this chapter and/or the last for coming back after so long! It is truly touching to have so much support after a hiatus of that length <3

Since I can't promise dates, I will merely say the next arc will be released when I'm done writing its first chapter. And, as I said in the beginning note, I'll share some news about the length of this story then!

Take care, y'all!! :DD

# Era, Part 1

## Chapter Notes

Welcome, my dear readers, to the new arc: Era!

News about definite length will come in the end note! :D without any further ado, I hope you enjoy this new chapter!

TW for mental health issues. Always be safe!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

A chill swept through the room. Logically, Tubbo knew it wasn't real. After the doctors released him from the bacta tank, a tall Devaronian with a kind face had explained that Tubbo would experience “cold flashes” since his body had been exposed to intense heat while injured. She'd frowned then, adding that Tubbo shouldn't exert himself too much until his body's homeostasis had reestablished itself.

Tubbo had barely understood a word. At the time, he'd been on the verge of tears, and even now, his whole body trembled. Tubbo squeezed his eyes shut and curled into his blanket. It was warm... so warm. The fact that such a meager comfort brought him so much joy probably should have worried him.

But who would call him out on it? It wasn't like anyone else was around.

Guilt, misery, and aching loneliness punched through Tubbo's comfortable bubble, and he pressed his face against the sofa cushion with a quiet whine.

It wasn't Dream's fault that he was busy; Tubbo knew that. When he'd woken up, the whole Temple had been in chaos. Dream had been saddled with the impossible task of debriefing the Council on everything that had happened, George and Sapnap were stuck at the task force, and Tommy and Wilbur...

Tommy and Wilbur.

*“What are you doing here?”*

Monotone, completely devoid of emotion. Tubbo had never heard Tommy sound so lifeless. The blond boy's Force presence had been anything but, though – It had whirled around him like a monstrous, blue shadow, enveloping his body.

*“I wanted to see if you were okay,”* Tubbo had squeaked out. *“I heard Wilbur was still unconscious.”*

*“Yeah. He's been that way.”*

Tubbo had scrambled out of the Angel Wing, terrified of the monster hulking over Tommy's mind. He'd realized then that he should have taken the hint and left Tommy alone, should have understood that there was a reason his former best friend had avoided him for four days straight. If only he'd fucking paid attention.

*It's not your fault,* murmured a quiet voice in Tubbo's head. It sounded extraordinarily like Dream. *You were worried about them.*

The not-Dream voice was drowned out by a flood of hatred, anger, and *why didn't you do things differently, you little bitch? Why didn't you push back against Schlatt and Quackity? You're a gods-damned Jedi padawan, so why-*

Tubbo slammed his blank mask over his mind, shutting off the torrent of thoughts. It was no healthier than it had been the first hundred times. But the silence eased the sharp claws that had started to dig into Tubbo's chest, and he heaved a sigh of relief as the pain faded.

The Devaronian nurse had brought that up, too. She'd been truthful and blunt with him, which Tubbo had appreciated. But that hadn't made her diagnosis any easier to accept.

Post-traumatic stress disorder. Heightened levels of self-destructive behavior, anxiety, and fear. A tendency to lapse into a flashback when presented with triggers and increased likelihood of insomnia. There was a chance, the Devaronian had added, that it would take Tubbo years to complete his Trials. Even then, the Council would have to personally sign off on his Knighting.

*What the fuck does the Council know, anyway?* Tubbo thought irritably, flopping his blanket-cocooned body over until he gazed up at the ceiling. *They weren't at the fucking factory. They don't know what happened. The only Councilmembers there were Philza, Rhodys, and Eret, and they're the only ones who actually care about us. I bet Cho-Nal wants to fucking exile me.*

Tubbo's thought came to a stuttering stop. Oh, gods. Exile. Why hadn't he thought of that?! For so many months, he'd only worried about Schlatt and Quackity, about keeping them appeased so he would survive. He'd never considered the *fucking Jedi High Council*.

Images flashed through Tubbo's mind, presenting him with all the times Philza had sighed and said that he wasn't a god. His votes on the Council were all but null when he was one man fighting against everyone else. Even with Rhodys and Eret... that was three people against nine others.

Nine... others. The majority.

Tubbo was going to be exiled. It was inevitable, right? He'd never figured out what George had done (and gods, it seemed like so long ago when *that* had been his main priority), but it couldn't be worse than becoming a traitor for an Underworld mob boss.

For one terrible second, Tubbo felt absolutely hollow. Then, slowly, warmth filled the chasm in his chest. If he was exiled, George would take care of him. The engineer had stopped by several times in the past four days, bringing more blankets, meals, and news of the task force's findings. Sometimes, Sapnap came with him, too. The two of them seemed at ease, if a bit tired and stressed.

But, even though Sapnap thought he wasn't looking, Tubbo saw the lines the Jedi Knight wore when Antfrost was mentioned. The cat Jedi – or, maybe not a Jedi – had escaped after the factory raid. Sapnap's eyes had really never lost their steely edge.

*He should forgive himself for that,* Tubbo thought blearily, drawing his blanketed hands up to his chin. *Antfrost is a lot more experienced than they thought. He did everything he could, and it's not his fault.*

*Are you going to forgive yourself, then?*

Again, the not-Dream voice gently interrupted Tubbo's ambling thought process. He pursed his lips, then decided not to linger on that idea for too long. Instead, he retreated to the back of his

mind, where his bond with Dream glowed softly. Tubbo smiled faintly as he examined the slowly strengthening cords. Dream had wasted no time reestablishing their bond, and really, Tubbo hadn't complained one bit.

*When are you coming back?* he asked, carefully pushing the thought through the bond. No response. After a moment, Tubbo realized that he'd accidentally kept his shields up, and he chewed his lip in frustration. He hadn't been able to break that habit quite yet. *When are you coming back?*

This time, Dream's voice instantly appeared in his head. *Just a few more minutes. Are you okay?*

Dream had been asking that question a lot. Once, Tubbo would have been exasperated by his master's overprotectiveness. Now, a small flame of joy flared in his chest, and Tubbo pressed his face into the blanket.

*I'm fine. Really. Just wanted to check on you.*

Dream's quiet chuckle brought an involuntary smile to Tubbo's face. *I'll be there soon, Tubs.*

*Okay.*

Their bond dimmed ever so slightly as Dream turned his attention to something else, but Tubbo still couldn't believe how much warmth it exuded. More than that... he wasn't sure when he'd conditioned himself to live without it.

Well, he had a vague idea. But he didn't want to think about that too much, either.

Tubbo settled himself with his back to the sofa's pillows, sighing quietly as he sank into the cushions. He hadn't slept well since returning to the Temple. That incessant fear that Quackity would suddenly show up and try to kill him hadn't faded, but... it lessened when Tubbo felt Dream's radiant Force presence. He wasn't so alone.

That had been the point of Quackity's tactics, the Devaronian nurse had added. To isolate and separate him. She'd suggested that he put some extra time and effort into reconnecting with Dream.

Again, Tubbo smiled, and he let his eyes flutter shut. Dream was coming back, and things were better. Not good. But better.

Ten minutes later, a quiet knock sounded on the front door.

Tubbo jolted awake from his power nap, panic coursing through his veins as he instinctively threw up his mental shields and reached for his lightsaber. But his lightsaber wasn't there. And he wasn't in that grimy room in the factory, shielding himself from the dripping pipes with a threadbare sheet. Tubbo was wrapped in a forest green blanket, warm and fuzzy.

Right. He was back at the Temple.

Slowly, painfully, Tubbo lowered his mental shields. Instantly, Dream's bond appeared in the back of his head, gently feeding him a stream of peace and serenity. Worry touched the fringes of the bond, but Dream didn't waver.

*He's trying so hard for me,* Tubbo thought miserably. He wanted to be happy about that; really, he did. But what did he-

"Tubbo?"

That was Dream's voice, muffled slightly by the front door.

“Yeah?” Tubbo called back. He winced at how scratchy he sounded was, and he quickly cleared his throat before trying again. “Yeah?”

“Can I come in? I brought some company.”

Tubbo hesitantly extended his mind and, to his surprise, found George's and Sapnap's Force presences glowing beside Dream's. They were tinged with that same edge of worry, but for the most part, they exuded nothing but relaxed happiness.

They were happy to see him. They were *happy* to see him.

“Yeah,” Tubbo said, and this time, he managed a weak smile. “Yeah, come in.”

The door hissed opened, and Dream, George, and Sapnap all stepped inside. Sapnap stumbled upon entry, and Tubbo suddenly realized that the Jedi Knight's arms were loaded with what looked like snacks. So were Dream's, in fact. George was the only one unhampered, but he held an electrodriver and a small wire.

“What's all that for?” Tubbo asked slowly. Dream and Sapnap exchanged wide grins, and George offered a knowing smirk before hurrying over to the holoscreen mounted on the wall. A touch of excitement colored Tubbo's heart. “Seriously,” he said, though he began to untangle his limbs from his blanket. “Why do you guys have all of that?”

Sapnap laughed, then dumped his armful of snacks onto the coffee table. “Georgie and I managed to escape from the task force,” he announced proudly. “And Clay is taking administrative leave, so that means the four of us are going to watch garbage Underworld media all day long.”

“It's not Underworld media!” George called from the other side of the room, where he'd twisted his body to peer behind Dream's holoscreen. “Gods know what would show up if I did that. I'm just pirating the stuff that plays in the royalty suites.”

Tubbo considered that for a moment, then echoed, “Royalty suites?”

“Yeah, where visiting nobility stay. The fancy district up north.” George's electrodriver suddenly whirled, and with a click and a whine, Dream's holoscreen came to life. Tubbo watched, fascinated despite himself, as some sort of soap opera began to play. “Tada!” George announced, waving his hands with a flourish.

“I bet you only know that shit since you've hacked the Royals District before,” Sapnap snickered. He grabbed a bag of fruit chips from the table and launched them at George's head. The engineer batted the missile away with a grumbled, “Shut the fuck up, Nick.”

Tubbo turned from the squabbling pair and found Dream standing next to the sofa's armrest, watching his friends fondly. “I don't understand,” Tubbo said weakly, and Dream's gaze instantly snapped to him. “I thought you lot had to be working around the clock. George said that's what the Council ordered the last time you talked to them.”

Dream's gaze softened, and Tubbo took a moment to appreciate his master's face. True to his word, Dream had stopped wearing his mask. Tubbo had half-expected to wake up and find a black smiley staring back at him. Instead, he'd been greeted by a face crisscrossed with horrific scars, a warm smile, and the brightest emerald eyes Tubbo had ever seen. He'd never admit it aloud, but he'd almost cried when Dream had smiled at him like that.

“Nick wasn't telling the whole truth about my 'administrative leave,’” Dream admitted. He rounded the armrest, and Tubbo quickly scooted over to make room. “I'm not going back to the task force. At least, not for a couple of days.”

Tubbo frowned. “But they need all hands on deck. George and Sapnap have been working for days.”

Dream shrugged, and again, Tubbo was a little dumbstruck by the expressiveness of his master's face. “I know. And I'm going to help. But...” George and Sapnap's squabbling suddenly got a little louder, and Dream shot a concerned look over the back of the sofa. When he looked back at Tubbo, nervousness trailed through their bond. “I'm not the head of the task force anymore.”

For exactly nine seconds, Tubbo's brain struggled to process that statement. Then he understood, and suddenly, he was overwhelmed by horror and relief and- adulation? But no, that was wrong, because Dream had *turned over the task force to someone else, and-*

“Hey, hey, it's okay.” Dream's hands landed on Tubbo's shoulders, startling him out of his downhill spiral. “I passed the torch to Phil and Techno,” Dream continued, and a faint smile touched his face. “I didn't just pass it off to the next idiot in line.”

That eased some of Tubbo's panic, and he nodded a little. That made things a little better, but...

“Why?” Tubbo croaked. “The task force has been so important to you for months. E-even before you learned about- *me*- it mattered. You were desperate to figure out who was attacking the Temple, and now you know. Why aren't you out there trying to find Schlatt?”

That same nervousness crossed their bond and paled Dream's cheeks, but there was an edge of steel in his eyes. “Because you just called him 'Schlatt.’”

Tubbo's mouth suddenly felt horribly dry. He hadn't even realized. His brain had instinctively followed the order that Aries had given him: “*Just call me ‘Schlatt.’ All my friends do.*”

Dream suddenly cleared his throat, and Tubbo refocused on his master. “I made a decision,” Dream began haltingly, carding nervous hands through his hair. It seemed like he was choosing each word before he said it. “I could either run the task force and catch those fucking bastards, or I could... come back. To you. And... help with your injuries, and, if you felt up to it, we could start training again. You probably made some bad habits with the Force, and I just...”

The taller man trailed off awkwardly. It took Tubbo a few seconds to process his master's speech, but then, it clicked. Dream had put aside the task force, his *driving motivation for the past few months*, for... him. To be Tubbo's master again.

Tears welled up in Tubbo's eyes.

“I can go back if you want me to,” Dream added hurriedly. “I know Phil and Techno aren't gonna let Aries slip away again, but if you want me to go after them, too, I can-”

“No!” Tubbo blurted. He quickly took a deep breath, trying to steady his heart rate and stem the tears blurring his vision. He accomplished neither. “No,” he repeated shakily. “Stay here. I trust Masters Techno and Philza.”

A relieved smile spread across Dream's face, and Tubbo found himself smiling back. The taller man happily flopped against the sofa, and once he got himself situated, he wrapped an arm around Tubbo's shoulders. Tubbo leaned into the touch without question. A few minutes later, George and Sapnap had also taken their places (George on Dream's other side, Sapnap squished next to

Tubbo), and their lazy day officially began.

Tubbo had never watched “shit media,” as Sapnap dubbed it after watching a half an hour of dramatic misunderstandings and hysterical sobbing. (“The three of us have literally had that conversation before!” George had shouted after yet another of Sapnap's snarky comments. “We *are* shit media!” Tubbo hadn't been able to stifle his laughter.) It was entertaining, Tubbo had to admit. The snacks and company made the garbage acting much more bearable.

But, after about two hours of mockery and munching, Tubbo felt a swirl of discontent. He frowned, slightly annoyed at being broken from his happy reverie. He first checked his bond with Dream, then extended his mind to George. They were both happy. In fact, they had their heads together as they laughed over something onscreen.

That only left one person.

Tubbo glanced over Sapnap. The Knight's face was drawn, lined with anger and frustration as he stared at the screen. They were watching some kind of bad police drama, where the main character could barely buckle up his own shoes. A suspect had just escaped the authorities and was cackling like a supervillain.

Oh.

*Do I say anything?* Tubbo wondered, chewing his lip absently. *He probably wouldn't be happy if I brought it up, and I don't want to ruin the mood.*

*But you're not angry. In fact, you think he should forgive himself. Surely he'd be happy to hear that you don't blame him.*

Tubbo silently cursed that stupid not-Dream voice. Damn its logical points and appeals to his worry for his friends. Because that was what Sapnap was. The Knight was only a few years older than him, but while Dream and George had been galavanting around in the Underworld (that was a trivial way to phrase it, Tubbo admitted), Sapnap had watched out for him. Sapnap had done all he could when he didn't know much better.

And the not-Dream voice was right.

“Hey,” Tubbo mumbled. He gently prodded Sapnap's arm, and the Knight flinched, seemingly startled out of his brooding. When Sapnap's bright eyes met his, a wave of nervousness crashed around in Tubbo's stomach. But he swallowed it, took a deep breath, and started talking.

“Listen, I know you're upset about Antfrost. And I would be, too, since he kinda caused us- *you*-uh- a lot of trouble. But... you did everything you could. And Antfrost is kinda really experienced, and none of us- *you*- knew that. So... I know you probably won't forgive yourself. But, if it counts for anything... I forgive you. We'll- *you'll*- find him.”

Gods, that had been the stupidest thing Tubbo had ever done. Sapnap's blank stare made Tubbo flush with embarrassment, and he cringed into himself, quickly turning back to the holoscreen. In Tibulta's Name, why hadn't he just stayed quiet? Why-

Sapnap gently grabbed Tubbo's arm and twisted him around again.

“Stop with the 'you' shit,” the Knight ordered, though his voice was soft. He ruffled Tubbo's hair, and the lines around his eyes loosened. “You're one of us. You always have been. And yeah, you're right – *we're* going to find Antfrost and drag his sorry ass back here.”

Tubbo's heart swelled. But he'd made enough sappy speeches for one day, so he settled for nodding a few times and leaning back against Dream's side. This time, Sapnap's amber Force presence glowed like a miniature sun.

After four long hours, Dream finally muted his holoscreen's speakers and stood, stretching his arms over his head.

"Everyone get up and move," the taller man ordered, nudging Tubbo's knee lightly. "I feel like someone packed me into a suitcase and shipped me to the next solar system."

"Old man," George drawled, though he also got to his feet.

Dream whacked the engineer's shoulder. "You're literally older than me!"

"Ha! I'm younger than *both* of you!" Sapnap launched to his feet with a triumphant noise, only to immediately ram his foot into the coffee table and go down with a loud "*Fuck!*"

Dream and George both dissolved into laughter, Sapnap shouting profanities all the while. It was loud and overwhelming, and they were probably going to get complaints from Dream's neighbors about how loud they were being at 2 p.m. But all the joy flowing through the Force made Tubbo beam.

This was what he'd been missing. This was what Schl- *Aries*- had been keeping him from. Outside of Dream's room, padawans stared, Jedi glared, and gods knew what the Council thought of him. But, for this moment, Tubbo could be happy.

*How long do you think it's gonna last?*

Tubbo froze. This was a new voice, one laced with venom but as sweet as honey. It wormed its way into Tubbo's mind until it was all he could hear. The voice sounded just like Schlatt's.

*C'mon. You really think they're gonna forgive you that easy? Tommy didn't, and you have no idea what Wilbur thinks of you. What if they hate you? And if the Council exiles you, you won't be able to come back. Dream is doing all of this for you, and what're you giving him in return? Trouble and strife.*

Tubbo tried to take a deep breath, to sink into the Force like the Devaronian nurse had instructed for when he got overwhelmed. But he couldn't. His chest squeezed, and the room blurred a little before his eyes.

*This isn't gonna last. The Council is gonna bring their lightsabers down on your neck, and if they don't, Dream and Sapnap, George... they'll wise up. They'll figure out that you don't deserve all of this. Just wait.*

Ghostly fingers pressed against Tubbo's shoulders, chest, and back, miming all the blows that Schlatt had dealt him. Though the bruises were gone, Tubbo knew where each had landed. Even the Force hadn't been able to shield him from that.

Tubbo vaulted over the back of the sofa and sped into Dream's room. He was vaguely aware that he'd taken his blanket with him and was tripping over the excess fabric, but he didn't stop, didn't slow down. Desperation flooded Tubbo's limbs, and suddenly, he was flying through the air. Then he landed face-first on Dream's bed, sinking into the soft mattress.

For a few seconds (minutes? Hours? He couldn't tell.), Tubbo just laid there, his hands fisted in Dream's sheets. In some detached way, he noticed the heaving of his chest, the way his entire body



shook, the thoughts howling in his mind. But it didn't hurt as it had mere seconds ago.

*I'm doing it again,* Tubbo realized eventually. *I'm sealing myself off so I don't feel anything. I don't think I'm supposed to be doing this.*

*You're not. But it's okay; we'll get there.*

Warm hands suddenly landed on top of Tubbo's, and he recoiled, the phantom touch of Quackity's fists suddenly pummeling his body. The hands disappeared, and some of Tubbo's panic ebbed.

*I'm sorry; I shouldn't have done that. Can you feel my presence?*

*Presence?* Tubbo repeated blearily, barely able to form the thought in the maelstrom of his mind. But his curiosity was too strong to ignore, and he reached out. There was a Force presence hovering next to him. Schlatt and Quackity weren't Force-sensitive. The Force presence was familiar, too, a brilliant emerald.

Dream. It was Dream, and Tubbo didn't have to hide.

"I'm sorry," Tubbo gasped. He tried to unwrap his hands from the sheets, but his fists just wouldn't respond to his commands. Tubbo squeezed his eyes shut and felt hot tears stream down his cheeks. "I'm sorry, Dream. I'm sorry. I didn't-"

Warm hands again landed on Tubbo's. This time, he relaxed into the touch, and slowly, Tubbo felt his fingers being pried from their death grip. Eventually, he was tugged into a sitting position. Tubbo swayed, strangely dizzy, but someone wrapped an arm around his shoulder to keep him upright. Dream. Dream was holding him.

"I'm sorry," Tubbo mumbled again. "I didn't- I thought I was fine. I was-"

"You aren't fine," Dream cut in gently, and Tubbo considered that for a moment. He wasn't, was it? "Baby steps, Tubbo. I'm with you."

"Mm."

Tubbo's brain was full of static, drowning out everything except for the alluring call of sleep. He was vaguely aware of someone else entering the room, sitting next to him and gently ruffling his hair. Then a third person hugged him from behind, and Tubbo's confusion was enough to rouse him from his half-slumber.

George sat on his other side. Sapnap had wrapped his arms around Tubbo's shoulders.

*They care about me.*

Tears slid down Tubbo's cheeks. But this time, he accepted it with a watery smile and leaned against Dream's chest.

*I'm here, Tubbo. I won't let anything happen ever again.*

*I believe you,* Tubbo murmured in return. Then he drifted off to the peaceful abyss of sleep.

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"Murder," Phil announced, swiping a file from his holopad onto the table's central display. Techno blinked, startled out of his stupor, and watched his partner continue shifting files onto the display. "Murder. Murder. Blackmail. A shit ton of business deals, more murder, and would you have gods-

damned guessed it? Another fucking murder!”

Phil flung the last file with an angry growl, then slumped back in his chair. Techno sent a weak tendril of peace across their bond, then leaned forward and examined the many files crowding the display.

Their Underworld contacts had been very forthcoming upon learning that Aries's factory had been raided. Every contact they had had wanted a piece of the mob boss's secrets. Phil and Techno had scanned all the documents (it never hurt to have copies), then shipped them off to their respective buyers. In return, they'd been rewarding with hundreds of messages, each detailing something about Aries's mysterious empire.

But there was nothing *useful*. Every mob boss under the surface seemed thrilled to detail the time when Aries had brokered a deal with them, killed their men, or otherwise “brutalized the Underworld economy,” as one contact had put it.

Unfortunately, their contacts couldn't (or wouldn't) give specifics. According to what little information Techno could piece together, Aries was a charismatic businessman with a knack for recruiting people to his side and a reputation for dealing with those that turned on him.

All in all, a bust. The only significant piece of information they'd gotten so far was a story that George had told them a few days previous.

*“I met him once. He showed up at my shop during my first month, asking for a simple job. Back then, he went by 'the Ram.' I did the job and didn't ask questions. Now that I'm thinking about it, his seal of approval is probably the only reason my shop survived. Anyway, a few months later, his name became 'Aries.' That's when I started hearing the rumors.*

*“The man built an empire. One of the strongest mob bosses on any level. He made his fortune by starting wars and selling to both sides. Eventually, he moved from funding the wars to waging them. He's a conqueror.”*

Techno wasn't surprised that Aries's ledger was stained red. Mob bosses didn't rise to power without stabbing the necessary backs.

Still, that left the task force with nothing. They were clueless as they had been when Aries had launched his first attack months previously.

Techno sat back in his chair, rubbing his eyes a little harder than was probably necessary. The burn of imaginary sandpaper was enough to wake him up. “Alright,” he sighed. He dropped his hands back to his holoboard and began navigating the central display. “We've got hundreds of messages, intel from Aries himself, and a system full of security codes. How is there nothing helpful? What are we missing?”

Phil was quiet. Techno glanced at his partner, inhaling to repeat himself, then paused. Phil had slumped forward. The other man's face was buried in his arms, and his shoulders rose and fell with the cadence of someone fast asleep.

A fond, if tired, smile touched Techno's face. He and Phil hadn't gotten full nights of sleep for a couple of days. When they weren't taking 30-minute power naps, they were searching through files. When someone forced them to eat lunch, they grabbed some go-to meals and visited Wilbur and Tommy in the infirmary. But, since Dream had handed control of the task force over to them... Techno didn't plan to eat or sleep for a few days.

Was it healthy? Absolutely not. Would Techno stop until he figured out Aries's plans or otherwise toppled the mob boss's empire? No. The Temple *needed* his efforts.

But Techno would be a liar if he said he wasn't exhausted. All the files and texts blended together like wet paint dripping from a canvas, and Techno's tired eyes could barely distinguish the difference between numbers and letters.

*Take a fucking nap, Techno.*

"I thought you were asleep," Techno retorted, with no real venom. Phil lifted his head enough to shoot him a sleepy glare, and Techno snorted. "Sleep, Phil. I'll wake you up in half an hour."

"No, you won't," Phil muttered. The other man shoved himself upright, though it looked like it took him an incredible amount of energy. Techno barely repressed a bemused smile. "Listen, I fucking know you," Phil continued, pointing an accusatory finger at Techno. "You're gonna keep working until you pass out. And I have to make sure you don't hurt yourself when that happens, so I'm not fucking sleeping."

A quiet laugh bubbled out before Techno could stop it. "I'm supposed to be looking out for you," he noted lightly. "You're supposed to be the one fighting for the Order, running yourself into the ground to keep everyone safe. What happened?"

Phil shrugged, rubbing his eyes with the back of his hand. "You saw Will."

Techno froze. Of course Phil knew the truth; how could he not, bonded as they were? It was no less jarring to hear aloud. Techno had always wanted to protect the Temple and its occupants, but something had changed when he'd seen Wilbur. Wilbur, the borderline pacifist, with his legs amputated at the knees. The nurses had warned Phil and Techno that, even with surgery, Wilbur would never be able to walk properly again. Prosthetics couldn't save nerve damage.

*I'm sorry. I shouldn't have brought that up.*

Melancholy accompanied the thought, and Techno let out a heavy breath. "It's fine," he mumbled, and for once, he meant it. "You're right. We'll sleep when we're dead."

There was a darker joke there; Techno knew. But Phil didn't say it, so neither did he.

"Back to work, then," Phil said, and he sat forward with a pained groan, rolling his neck. Techno winced at the multiple cracks. "Okay. We've looked at this for hours, and we're getting nowhere. Any new messages that might help?"

Techno quickly navigated to their shared inbox and refreshed the page. Nothing.

"Fucking hell. Okay, uh..." Phil pressed his palms into his eyes. Even without their bond, Techno could tell that his partner was desperately trying to fight off his exhaustion. "Back to the basics. Fucking basics. What do we know about Aries?"

*Nothing*, Techno wanted to say. Instead, he blinked the dark spots out of his eyes, pulled up the search bar, and searched for every file containing legitimate information about Aries. Neither he nor Phil addressed the fact that he misspelled Aries's name three times before finally getting it right.

"Aries, also known as 'Schlatt,' first and/or last name unknown," Techno recited dutifully. "Age also unknown. We're working off the assumption he's in his late 20s."

He swiped to the next file, then scowled as a picture of Aries's face popped onto the display. It was a little grainy, as it had been pulled from the factory's security feed, but it clearly displayed the mob boss's face. Techno hated everything about the man – slicked-back hair, majestic ram's horns, and eyes that looked pitch black. Aries radiated more confidence than a prize-winning scientist.

“No known hideouts, residences, or businesses,” Phil added, and he dragged a lazy finger across his holopad. The display swiveled at his command. “He has lots of contacts around the Underworld, and everyone acknowledges Aries's reputation, but the man is basically a ghost. He never shows his face unless he's dealing with a traitor or planning something big.”

“Or both,” Techno muttered darkly. Phil's chuckle was equally morbid. “No known affiliates, and his only allies are other mob bosses that he's struck deals with.”

In conclusion, they still had nothing. Techno rubbed his face a few times, stifling a frustrated groan. When he glanced back over at Phil, he found his partner wearing a thoughtful look.

“Actually, that's not true,” Phil said slowly.

*What's not true?* Techno asked, too tired to speak aloud.

Luckily, Phil seemed to have a reserve of energy Techno hadn't known existed. The other man eagerly leaned around the table, grabbing Techno's holoboard and frantically typing a new name in the search bar: Quackity. Techno watched, curious, as Phil navigated through the files until he finally found what he was looking for. A picture of a card filled the screen.

“Royal Vault,” Techno read aloud, squinting at the faint lettering. “Yeah, I remember this. Dream and George confronted the Night Thief, and he broke and gave up Aries's name. That's the bank card that they got his name from.”

“Look closer,” Phil ordered.

Techno did as he was told, squinting even harder at the image. The Royal Vault's card displayed a name, age, gender, and alias. A. Quackity, 26, male, the Night Thief. All things that were somewhat well known. Below the personal information was a picture (obscured by some sort of reflection), and below that was a simple code: 1228910.

“You're gonna have to help me out here, Phil,” Techno mumbled. “I don't know what you're telling me to look at.”

A ping of guilt flew across their bond, and Phil gently tapped the back of Techno's hand in silent apology before leaning forward. “The code,” he explained, jabbing a finger at the display. It pixelated under his rough touch. “910 is Aries's personal code for the Vault. One of our contacts works there, and he knows that's Aries's code. He confirmed that Quackity uses it, too.”

Dark spots again danced before Techno's eyes. He tried his utmost best to ignore them. “And? We know Quackity is part of Aries's inner circle; maybe that's just a thing he does so he can remember his employees' codes.”

“Or-” Phil swiveled the display until they were watching footage taken from the factory's security system. A Force burst exploded from Tommy's body, and Techno allowed a proud smile to touch his face. “-Quackity is special,” Phil finished, pausing the footage. “Look.”

In the bottom right corner of the screen, two men could be seen recoiling from Tommy. The taller one, presumably Aries, shielded the shorter one with his body, his hands resting on Quackity's hip and shoulder.

“So they're together,” Techno said, confused. “I still don't get it.”

A spark suddenly lit up in Phil's icy eyes, coloring his face with newfound life. The sudden brightness of his partner's Force presence revitalized Techno a little.

“They are,” Phil agreed. “And we can exploit that.”

Techno's momentary burst of energy dimmed, and he shot his partner a helpless look. “Phil, c'mon. Relationships don't last in the Underworld. They'll break up by next week, and Quackity will be looking for a new boss to run for. He probably only stuck around since he knows there's money in killing Jedi.”

Phil wagged a finger. “And *that's* where you're wrong.” He typed in a command, and several messages clogged the screen. “We've got at least twenty messages citing a 'connection' or a 'relationship' between Aries and Quackity. Tubbo even mentioned that-”

A new message suddenly pinged in the corner of the display. Techno flinched, then immediately cursed himself for being so jumpy. Gods, he really did need to sleep. (As did Phil, since Techno felt a flare of alarm zing across their bond.)

“It's Augus,” Phil reported, double-tapping the message. His eyes began flicking across the screen, so Techno waited, content to let Phil give him the short version. If he tried to read in his current state, he'd end up jumbling all the letters together.

Eventually, Phil sat back in his chair, disbelief winding through their bond. “I'll be damned,” he breathed. Techno just cocked an eyebrow, and after another moment, Phil shot him a stunned look. “Augus says she heard about our search for information. I don't know how she knew now was the right fucking time, but she offered a story. Aries and Quackity showed up at her shop five years ago, asking if she could see the future. Augus took a palm reading since they aren't Force-sensitive, and she said they were both wearing rings.”

Something fresh blossomed in Techno's chest. It took a minute for his tired brain to process the emotion, but eventually, he realized it was hope.

Was Phil right about Quackity being “special”?

Was it actually a viable lead?

Techno stood and rounded the table, leaning over Phil's shoulders to type another command into the holoboard. The display whirled around until the security footage from the factory was playing once again. The system had been set to wipe its cameras every day, but before the raid, before Wilbur and Tommy had been dragged out onto the walkways, before *any* of that, there was a two-minute sequence of Aries and Quackity outside of Aries's office. Techno knew; he'd watched the footage over and over until it had been burned into his brain.

Sure enough, Aries and Quackity exited the executive office, then began talking. Techno quickly pinched the screen, zooming in closer and closer until he could see the two men's hands.

Both wore rings.

“Holy shit,” Phil breathed. He leaned back in his chair, and his head gently rested against Techno's stomach. “Holy fucking shit. If this means what I think it means, then... Quackity is valuable. We don't need to find Aries. We just need to find the fucking Night Thief.”

Techno nodded once, even though he knew Phil couldn't see it. His mind was reeling, and

suddenly, he felt alert and sharp again.

Aries had a pressure point. If Phil and Techno tracked Quackity down (which couldn't be too hard, if Dream and George had done it by themselves), captured the man, and took him captive, then they had leverage over Aries.

Wait. That didn't make sense.

Techno reached out and caught his partner by the arm (since Phil had launched to his feet). “Wait, wait, wait, we're missing something,” Techno said slowly. He forced his brain to connect the dots, to follow his gut feeling. “Okay, so, Quackity is valuable to Aries. And after five years, he still hasn't turned traitor or left to run for another boss.”

Techno's brain promptly dropped his hunch right there, and he growled in frustration. Luckily, Phil's eyes widened, and Techno prayed that his partner had made sense of the *wrongness* that made every single of his instincts scream.

“If Quackity is loyal,” Phil mumbled, his face going pale, “why'd he give up Aries in the first place? And wouldn't Aries have beat the shit out of him for breaking like that?”

Even though he knew he was missing the full gravity of that statement, dread crept into Techno's stomach, twisting it into tight knots. Whether the feeling was his or Phil's, he didn't know. But when Phil hauled him to his feet, Techno didn't protest.

“We have to talk to the Council,” Phil said hurriedly. Stray emotions pinged across their bond, and the other man maintained his hold on Techno's wrist as he typed on the holoboard, saving files to his holopad. “If we get their approval, we can head to Augus's shop and see if she has more information for us.”

*How does talking to Augus help us now? Techno thought miserably. We've been playing holochess blindfolded for months.*

Phil glanced at Techno, and for a split second, genuine fear burned in his partner's eyes. The expression made Techno's stomach wrap itself up even tighter.

*I don't know. But we have to do something. Aries is 12 fucking steps ahead of us, and if we don't-*

Then the lights went out with a dull whine.

Panic surged through Techno in a horrible wave. He frantically extended his mind, and to his relief, Phil's Force presence burned brightly before him. After a moment, Techno broke through his panic and realized that Phil was still holding his wrist.

For a few seconds, they stood there, frozen. Techno waited for the other shoe to drop, for someone to barge in and try to kill them. But nothing happened. When Phil turned on his lightsaber and bathed the room in green light, nothing popped from the shadows.

But Techno knew better than to relax.

And his fear was well-founded. Not five seconds after Phil activated his lightsaber, a deep, low rumble shook the building. Techno's stomach dropped through his boots.

“Techno?” Phil's voice was quiet, barely louder than a whisper. “What the fuck did we miss?”

Techno swallowed once, twice. “I don't know,” he rasped. “I can't sense anything outside the

building.”

Phil's grip on his wrist tightened.

“Come on,” the other man muttered. He began guiding them across the room, away from the glitching display and towards the headquarters' doors. “Maybe the power just went out.”

It was a false hope, and they both knew it. Dread hung heavy in the air, choking Techno like fog, and concern, fear, and anger pinged across their bond. With his free hand, Techno pulled his lightsaber from his belt.

One way or another, he and Phil were walking right into whatever trap Aries had laid for them.

*12 steps ahead*, Techno thought, and he clenched his jaw. *He should have planned even more. This won't be enough to kill us.*

But Techno's hands shook, and Phil's steadiness was in shambles, emotions tumbling across their bond like a sparking wire.

12 steps ahead might be enough.

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A hiss sounded from the other side of the room, and Bad peered over the top of his book. Tommy was standing by the window, fiddling with his right hand. His new prosthetic was silver, more sophisticated than Philza's since Tommy was right-handed and needed it in his daily life. But he still had to get used to it. And, as Bad watched, Tommy's face contorted into a snarl. The blond boy's Force presence flared until he was engulfed by a raging whirlwind, shedding emotions and power like a bonfire spitting embers.

Bad went back to reading.

Tommy was angry. He had been for days. When Bad had arrived in the Angel Wing after Wilbur's first surgery, Tommy had whirled around with a near-feral growl. Upon realizing it was Bad, he'd relaxed, and as the days went on and Wilbur stabilized, some of that anger had faded. But it had never fully left.

Bad closed his eyes briefly, trying to forget how unstable Tubbo's Force presence had been when he'd fled the Wing. Bad had sent Dream a private message, and he could only pray that the younger man had sought his padawan out.

But Wilbur didn't have that luxury. He'd come and gone in bursts of fitful consciousness, and every time, the doctors reported nothing but good news. Though the lines around Tommy's eyes loosened with every positive report, he hunched at Wilbur's bedside for hours on end, completely silent. When his anger took over, his brilliant gift turned into a monstrosity.

It reminded Bad painfully of Dream. The anger was all too familiar, as was the way Tommy lashed out at anyone who entered Wilbur's room. But even if Bad tried to reach out, he knew Tommy would brush him off. They weren't close enough.

Realistically, Bad wanted to enlist the help of Techno or Philza. Both could and had helped Tommy, and during their half an hour visits, Tommy was better. Then they left, and Tommy seemed all the worse.

It was a lose-lose scenario no matter what way it was spun.

“You never fucking told me, you know.”

Bad blinked, and he realized Tommy had returned to his seat at Wilbur's bedside. The blond boy's eyes were dim, but undeniably aware.

“You're going to have to be more specific,” Bad said slowly. Tommy fixed him with a hard look, and Bad realized they were about to have a difficult conversation. He carefully set his bookmark between the pages, then placed his book on the side table. “What did I not tell you?”

“Why you're here.” Tommy's voice was gruff. Harsh, even. He sounded years older. “I know you care about Wilbur and shit, but you've got other stuff to do, right? Teaching other padawans, working with the task force.” Tommy's eyes turned from ice to frozen steel. “The important shit that's gonna catch Schlatt and put an end to this fucking nightmare.”

Bad barely hid a frown at Tommy's use of “Schlatt” rather than “Aries.” From what little Dream had told him when they'd gotten a chance to talk, Tubbo did the same. The mob boss must have told them his name as a way to get inside their heads.

*It worked*, Bad thought, chewing his lip.

“Well?”

Tommy was still staring at him, eyes cold. Bad considered for a moment, then decided the truth was the best option, even if it hurt the most. Tommy deserved the truth.

“I'm here to make sure Wilbur doesn't die,” Bad said slowly. Panic instantly overtook Tommy's face, and suddenly, he looked like a kid again. Bad quickly added, “I know his reports are good, and hopefully, I never have to do a thing. It's just a precaution. I do care about Wilbur, so I'm here in case something goes wrong. I can cast a rune of stasis to keep him alive until the doctors can stabilize him.”

Tommy looked puzzled, then frustrated, then warily hopeful. “You can do that?” he asked, that same note of hesitant hope touching his voice.

Bad smiled faintly. “I've cast it on myself before, Tommy. I know I can.”

“Oh.”

Tommy sat back in his chair, but the glint in his eyes told Bad that the conversation wasn't over yet. He didn't mind, either. Gods knew that Tommy needed something to distract him.

Sure enough, a few seconds later, Tommy asked,

“Why'd you have to use it on yourself?”

Bad immediately rolled up his sleeves, revealing a few of the many scars decorating his body. “I was stuck in the middle of a civil war a few years back,” he explained, using his magic to highlight the now-mostly faded scars. Tommy watched him with unmistakable fascination, and Bad bit back a smile.

“I was acting as a mediator between two warring tribes on this Outer Rim planet. A third tribe ambushed the meeting, and I had to stop the fighting and protect the innocent. Somehow, the people became convinced *I* was trying to kill them, and they turned on me. I barely got back to the ship before I collapsed. So I cast a rune of stasis on myself.”



“And you almost died?” Tommy prompted, gaze still fixed on Bad's arms.

“Mhm. Luckily, a few guards had come with me, so they rushed back here when they found me passed out in the cargo bay. It's a good thing they were fast, too, since my magic could only last so long.”

Tommy nodded a little, and he seemed significantly more at ease knowing that Wilbur was protected from death. Bad decided against telling the blond boy about how much his injuries had hurt, that he'd been so terrified of dying, and the surgery that had left a grizzly suture wound across his right hip. Tommy didn't need to know those kinds of details.

Then again, maybe he already knew them too well. He flexed his new durasteel hand as he stared at Wilbur, and he didn't bat an eye as he scanned his master's amputated legs.

It was all too familiar. Tommy was growing up too fast, shoved out of his padawan years by tragedy and loss.

Bad heaved a silent sigh and picked up his book once again. *Hurry, Dream*, he pleaded. *Aries is going to tear this Order to pieces.*

For the next half an hour, they sat in silence. Bad tried to read, but his attention kept swiveling to Tommy, to the boy's unstable Force presence and dull eyes. Bad hadn't been able to help Dream, so engulfed in his grief of losing George he'd been. But he couldn't help Tommy, either. He just didn't hold enough of the boy's trust.

Just as Bad was considering putting down his book and meditating, something on the panel next to Wilbur's bed beeped.

Tommy's alarm was so potent that Bad felt a momentary wave of panic grip his muscles. “What the fuck was that?” the padawan demanded, seemingly to himself. “What was-”

“T-Tommy?”

Wilbur's eyes fluttered open, and again, Bad was bowled over by the sheer force of Tommy's relief. The boy had the twin gifts of extreme sensitivity to the Force and extreme control over it, yet it seemed like he hadn't learned to moderate either. Was it because of his panic, Bad wondered, or had Wilbur made a choice?

“Wilbur?” Tommy asked. His voice trembled, but a smile touched his face as the taller man blinked blearily, narrowing his eyes against the light streaming in through the windows. “Will, are you okay? How do you feel?”

“Fine, fine,” Wilbur muttered, waving a hand at Tommy and slurring his words a little. “I'm not in a coma, y'know, Tommy. Just tired.”

The padawan's grin was radiant. “Yeah. Just tired.”

Wilbur's mouth twitched in a faint smile, and he reached up, gently ruffling Tommy's hair. Wilbur was still high on pain meds from his latest surgery, and when they wore off in an hour or two, he probably wouldn't remember how fond he'd been. Still, Bad saw no reason to tell Tommy that. The boy needed the affection.

So Bad went back to reading and left Master and Padawan to their conversation. It wasn't his place to intrude; he could talk to Wilbur once the taller man was officially released from the Angel Wing. The fact that Wilbur was even in the Angel Wing (a section of the Temple dedicated to

patients in their last stages of recuperation) gave Bad hope. The sooner Wilbur was back on his feet, the sooner Tommy would recover.

And the sooner Tommy and Tubbo could have a proper conversation.

Wilbur was only awake for about five minutes, and when Bad glanced up, Tommy had resumed his sentry position. His face was softer at the edges, his Force presence a little less turbulent.

“It's Will's fucking fault that you're hurting, by the way.”

Tommy's sudden call startled Bad out of his quiet observations. “What?” he asked, confused.

The padawan tapped his own head. “The way I pull the Force around. I don't always have it under control, and I'm s-” Tommy cut himself off, grimaced, then pushed on. “Yeah. Anyway, Will never really developed my... gift. Sensitivity. Whatever the fuck. He told me that control would come with time, but, uh...” A wan smile touched Tommy's face. “I think he didn't want me to learn the Jedi way. He didn't- *doesn't*- much like the Code.”

Bad considered that for a moment, then nodded. So Wilbur *had* made a choice. “That sounds about right,” he agreed aloud. “Wilbur had a challenging relationship with his master. He probably didn't want to make the same mistakes with you.”

Tommy shot Bad a sharp look, but Bad didn't flinch. At the moment, he was more concerned with keeping Tommy distracted from the present than hiding old secrets. If that meant exposing a little of Wilbur's past, so be it. It was a wonder Tommy hadn't already picked out the memories himself, given his gift.

“He was the padawan of Master Adoli Kungjan,” Bad began, absently running his fingers along the spine of his book. “Adoli was a good Jedi, but she refused to listen to anything except the old Jedi constructs. You know, the Elders brought with them when they built this Temple. And Wilbur didn't like that. He likes to push the boundaries, figure out things for himself. I'm sure you know that.”

Tommy chuckled, but it was weak. He was staring at Wilbur's slack face, an emotion Bad couldn't identify swirling in his eyes.

“So Wilbur completed his Padawan Trials, then basically abandoned the Code.” Bad allowed an amused smile to touch his face. “He became the best diplomat the Order has ever seen, and he didn't care what anyone said about him. I think he wanted you to grow up without the confines he did.”

The room was quiet. A niggling doubt told Bad that honesty wasn't always the best policy, but he shook the feeling off. Wilbur cared more for Tommy than he did himself. He'd probably be happy that Bad wasn't letting the padawan stew.

Then a quiet snuffle broke the silence, and Bad realized that tears were sliding down Tommy's cheeks.

“Why'd you tell me all that shit?” the blond boy asked, scrubbing at his face with the back of his sleeve. “It doesn't- it doesn't matter. He's- we're still Jedi.”

Bad heard the unspoken question: *right?*

“I mean, I wouldn't know,” Bad murmured. “I'm a daemon. My connection to my magic is different than a Jedi's to the Force.”

Tommy shot Bad a dark look, but the ferocity of the expression was dimmed by the fact that he was still crying. He looked more dejected than angry now, and again, Bad wished that he'd developed a closer relationship with Tommy. Enough so that he could give the padawan comfort and advice that wasn't hidden in vague answers and stories about other people.

"But you're still a Jedi," Tommy said flatly. "Don't you follow your own fucking Code?"

"Language," Bad chided. He couldn't stop the habit that time, but Tommy didn't seem to mind the rebuke. Rather, the boy's eyes glowed with thinly veiled fragility and desperation.

Why not? Bad could share his personal beliefs for once.

He took a deep breath, then set his book aside and leaned forward, resting his arms on his knees. "I do follow the Code," Bad admitted softly. "But I don't think I'm a Jedi. I don't think any of us are. I mean, look at my friends. Dream, George, Sapnap, Antfrost. Look at *your* friends. Wilbur, Techno, Philza, Tubbo. Do you think any of them are model Jedi?"

Tommy was silent. Bad pressed on.

"This is just my opinion, you know. But I think it was a mistake to take on the mandates of an Order that died off millennia ago. We're trying to mimic the past, and I don't think it's really working. I don't think we're Jedi anymore. I think we're... Force-sensitives living in an outdated Order. That's why I think Philza and Eret are doing so much good. They're pushing for something new."

Again, silence overtook the room. Bad mentally ran through the little speech he'd just made, then winced as he realized how much it had sounded like propaganda.

"Like, I said, that's just what I believe," he added awkwardly, wringing his hands. He'd gone a little too far, hadn't he?

Tommy's Force presence swirled, glowing softly as it cocooned him. His gaze hadn't shifted from Wilbur's face, but thoughtfulness had overtaken his expression. Bad heaved a mental sigh and sat back. Well, if nothing else, he'd given Tommy something to mull over for a few hours. Gods, he really had to be more careful about ranting to the first ear willing to listen to him.

Maybe he was a little more lonely than he'd realized.

"Who woulda thought? Fucking Master Bad, pushing for the Jedi Order to move into a new era." Bad chuckled at that, but Tommy glanced at him with a surprisingly earnest smile. "Why aren't you on the Council?" the padawan asked quietly.

Bad's mirth died. He considered his words carefully for a moment, then said simply, "They don't like me."

There was much more to the issue than that, but Bad had rambled enough for one day. Thankfully, Tommy accepted the answer with only a nod.

Another half an hour ticked by in silence. Bad tried to focus on his reading, but suddenly, an analysis of the different Jedi forms didn't seem as inviting. Instead, it mocked him, asking if he'd made the right decision by telling an already unstable padawan that he believed the Order to be outdated. That the Code wasn't as binding as other Jedi said it was. That his own master was, simply put, a rebel.

It was out of his hands now; this he knew. But Bad still worried.

“Hey, Master Bad?”

The title shocked Bad more than the sudden break in the quiet, and he glanced up. “Yeah?” he asked softly.

Tommy was frowning at the panel beside Wilbur's bed, and at Bad's positive reaction, the padawan flicked the corner of the screen. “Wilbur's vitals just went all screwy for a second,” Tommy reported, clearly irritated. “I think the machine's fucked up again.”

Bad stood with a heavy sigh. “I'll go get a nurse,” he said, setting his book aside and heading for the door. Tommy grunted his thanks, and Bad smiled fondly at the padawan's turned back before swinging around the doorframe and striding down the hallway.

The Angel Wing was secluded in the back corner of the Temple – half to ensure the peace of those resting, half to prevent friends of the injured from disrupting more critically injured patients. Bad still didn't understand why the Council hadn't moved Philza to the Angel Wing, given Technoblade's protective nature. Regardless, Bad spared a moment to take a deep breath of fresh air as he stepped out onto the long bridge connecting the Angel Wing to the lower medical center.

He'd always loved the view from the bridge. Bad had spent more hours than he wanted to admit in the Angel Wing, looking after a friend (or recuperating himself), and something about seeing the entire Temple settled whatever unrest Bad felt. He nodded once to himself, then continued on.

That was when Bad felt it. A disturbance, a ripple of ill intent and kinetic power.

“Σταματήστε όλα όσα πέφτουν και αντιστρέψτε την τάξη του κόσμου!” Bad shouted, entirely on instinct. He frantically dragged both his magic and the Force from deep inside himself and wove them together. The resulting combination exploded from Bad's body, rippling away from him like a shockwave, burning a complex rune onto the bricks beneath his feet.

Nothing. Bad couldn't feel anything. But the ill intent was still there, and-

*There.* Behind Bad, high above him, something was hurtling towards the Angel Wing.

“No!”

The shriek tore itself from Bad's throat, and he whirled around, throwing his hands out desperately. Only the Force came to his aid, but he caught the *thing* in mid-air, which gave him enough time to look up at-

Oh. Oh, gods, *no*.

A massive chunk of rubble hovered over the Angel Wing, suspended only by Bad's hold.

*Not good*, Bad thought, and he almost giggled hysterically. This was far so beyond “not good.” The rubble must have come from somewhere, which meant- no, no, one thing at a time. First, Bad had to get rid of the threat. He wasn't strong enough to move it, but a rune of void could theoretically destroy the rubble.

It was the only plan Bad had. No Jedi were nearby right now, and he could *not* let all the people inside the Wing die.

Especially not Wilbur and Tommy.

“Καταστρέψτε τη μορφή του στόχου μου,” Bad croaked. It felt like trying to swim with all his

clothes on, but he managed to call up his magic, using his right hand to write the runes in the air. *“Γυρίστε το σε αυτό που με τροφοδοτεί.”*

High above the Angel Wing, golden runes appeared on the rubble's craggy surface.

Bad swallowed the nausea threatening to drive him to his knees and rasped, *“Κάντε το καθαρό; φτιάξε-”*

Then a piercing siren ripped through the air, wailing in unison with hundreds of its fellows and tearing through Bad's already shaky concentration. Bad screamed as his ears were assaulted by the deafening chorus. At least, he tried to scream; *he couldn't hear anything over-*

The chunk of rubble over the Angel Wing slipped a few meters lower. Bad's stomach lurched.

*I have to do this*, he thought desperately. *I have to.*

*“Καταστρέψτε τη μορφή του στόχου μου. Γυρίστε το σε αυτό που με τροφοδοτεί.”*

The runes reappeared on the chunk of rubble, and this time, they burned into the uneven surface. Bad exhaled shakily, then raised both his hands, tracing runes into the air with both hands and praying that he could hold it for just a few more seconds.

*“Κάντε το καθαρό; να γίνει αυτό που ήταν στο σύμπαν,”* Bad choked out. Blood leaked from the corner of his mouth. He ignored it. *“Έχει φύγει, αλλά η δύναμή του θα συνεχιστεί.”*

With a rumble like thunder, Bad's runes turned deep red. Instantly, the weight lifted from his shoulders, and Bad crumbled to his knees, throwing up onto the bricks. Gods, he hadn't expended his magic like that in so long. His whole body shook, his head spun, and his lungs felt three sizes too tight.

But when Bad looked up, the chunk of rubble was gone. In its place was a shimmering red haze, which dissipated almost as soon as Bad caught sight of it. He cracked a ragged smile. The Angel Wing was safe.

*“Master Bad! Bad! Oh, fuck, what happened?”*

Someone grabbed Bad's arm. He groaned as he was hauled to his feet, and the world spun violently. *“Give me a second,”* he mumbled, flapping a hand and trying not to throw up again. *“Just let the-”*

Bad's magical equilibrium kicked in and quickly began fixing his broken body, quickly restoring his senses and granting him balance. His ears popped, and the sounds of sirens once again returned. His eyesight came last, and when Bad blinked the dark spots away, he found Tommy standing next to him, wide-eyed.

*“Sorry,”* Bad gasped. *“I didn't- don't worry. What's going on?”*

Panic edged Tommy's gaze. The padawan swallowed, then turned, pointing towards the rest of the Temple. Bad followed Tommy's gaze.

His heart stopped.

Far in the distance, the Temple Gates had been toppled. They laid on the ground, a hole seared around their middles, and through the breach came an entire army. Gigantic mechs marched forward, moving with horrifying speed for their builds. Fires had already erupted in the Gardens,

and hundreds of tiny black dots swarmed around the mechs, fast as lightning. Bad couldn't make out any Force presences, but he recognized the all-black garb. Anti-Jedi mercenaries.

Aries had come to their door.

And he'd brought the Third Temple Siege with him.

## Chapter End Notes

As always, thank you so incredibly much for reading! Y'all mean everything to me, and if you feel so inclined, please leave a comment and let me know what you thought!

If you don't care about how long this story will be, I thank you again for reading, and I'll see you once I finish the next chapter!

Now, the news...

Some of y'all might have noticed that this story *finally* has a chapter count. All that is left is the remainder of this arc and the epilogue - my friends, we are officially in the final arc. I can't believe we're actually here, a year after this project's beginning, but we gosh darn made it.

I hope y'all enjoy Era as much as I'm going to! There's still a helluva ride left in store! >:D

Take care, y'all! Until the next chapter!

## Era, Part 2

### Chapter Notes

This chapter? This chapter I poured my heart into (even more so than usual!), and you know what? I'm happy. I'm happy with the monster I've made. I hope y'all like it as much as I do!

TW for some violence/blood (but it's mostly nongraphic) and... death. Yeah. Please read safely!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Eret crested the hill to devastation.

He'd seen the advancing army from afar. He'd grabbed his lightsaber and charged outside, only to be met with the acrid stench of smoke. He'd heard the screams, felt the vibrations of rubble tumbling and buildings collapsing. He'd felt the Force presences clustered at the Temple Gates, and he'd sprinted towards them.

But Eret hadn't realized the extent of the damage. The Gardens had become a war zone, and only years of practice had kept Eret from accidentally toppling into fire-filled craters. Lasers had careened past him, grazing his arms. People with weapons had charged him, and to his great sadness, some of them had Force presences that burned brightly.

He'd put each and every one of them on the ground. Some lost limbs to his lightsaber. Others were merely unconscious. And the few aggressive ones that didn't go down easily had to be put down permanently.

Eret rationalized that the lives of his fellow Jedi mattered more than those of the invading forces. He knew that it wasn't right, and as soon as this battle was over, he would have to take a serious look at himself and wonder if he'd drifted too far from the Code.

But it wasn't the time. Because as soon as Eret reached the area surrounding the demolished Temple Gates, his heart stuttered, then dropped through his boots.

A dead zone hovered around the enemy army like a gargantuan shield. No, not like. It *was* a gargantuan shield. Eret hurriedly ducked behind a toppled pillar and stretched his mind as far as he could, but the dead zone persisted. Mercenaries and droids alike burst from the empty space, whirling into action with shrill screams or roared battle cries.

A mercenary's faint Force presence suddenly stumbled into Eret's hiding place, and he lashed out on instinct, driving the hilt of his lightsaber into their exposed temple. His attacker shrieked, then collapsed. Eret didn't bother checking what species it was.

Years and years of being a Jedi, yet he'd never seen a dead zone like the one that squatted inside the Temple. It taunted him, mocked him, and Eret fought off the anger lighting up his nerves.

Being blind had many, many downsides. It was a weakness that everyone in the Order knew about, even though Eret kept his problems and struggles to himself. But no one knew the full extent of it.

No one knew how weak he really was. Without the Force, he was clinically blind. Eret's other senses had improved, yes, but not enough to keep him alive as Jedi. The Force showed him people's positions and emotional states, and he'd learned to recognize the outlines of different objects, like doors, windows, and utensils. Even plants and water emitted very faint Force signatures.

The dead zone took away what little he had left. It was like staring at the void itself, a square area where *nothing* existed. Not plants, not people, not even other Jedi.

Other... Jedi. Oh, gods.

Eret snapped himself from his fixation and frantically expanded his mind once more. Other Jedi would undoubtedly respond to the threat, too. And if Eret couldn't see anything, that meant the Force simply didn't exist. And without the Force-

Someone flashed into Eret's peripheral vision. He whirled around and honed in on the presence, and after a second, he recognized it as Rhodys. The Trandoshan was shedding emotions like an out-of-control padawan, and they were charging right for the dead zone.

"Rhodys!" Eret bellowed. He grabbed the back of the Trandoshan's robes with the Force, and to his relief, Rhodys stumbled to a stop. "Over here!"

Rhodys looked around for a moment, then ran over to him. They ducked behind the felled pillar just in time to avoid a stray laser bolt. "Eret?" they hissed. "What are you doing? I expected to find you in the middle of the action, not-"

The Trandoshan cut themself off, but Eret heard the rest of the sentence well enough. *Not hiding.*

"Try to throw something at those mercenaries with the Force," Eret ordered. Confusion stained Rhodys's Force presence, but Eret waved a frustrated hand. Gods, they *were wasting time, and-* "Just do it. Trust me."

Rhodys followed his order without any further questioning. They lifted a small chunk of rubble from the ground, then hurled it over the pillar protecting them. Eret watched its progress. As soon as it hit the dead zone, it disappeared from his sight, but Rhodys's sharp inhale was more than enough to explain what had happened.

"It just dropped," Rhodys murmured. "I can't feel anything over there. It's- it's a shield. Surrounding all those AT-TEs. And there's-" Rhodys cut themself off with a quiet gasp, and a rush of horror colored their Force presence.

"What?" Eret demanded, and he fought down the nerves bubbling in his stomach.

Silence. Then:

"They're dead. So many Jedi. I see them now, beneath the feet of those AT-TEs and hidden behind the rubble. Gods, I had thought that no one had responded. Not that they were dead. The- the dead zone is hiding them. They're- gods."

Eret swallowed. Suddenly, he felt all but powerless. It was an irrational fear, and he quickly tried to release it into the Force. But it persisted, gnawing at his mind. Without the Force, he couldn't *do* anything. And there was a chance his allies had rushed in.

Dream. Philza, Techno. Gods, *Sapnap*.

Impulse overwhelmed Eret's common sense, and he pressed his thumb against his earpiece,



shuffling through the frequencies. “Philza,” he snapped. Rhodys instantly glanced at him, worry drifting from their Force presence, but Eret ignored them. “Philza, come in. Where are you?”

Nothing. Horrible, horrible nothingness.

*“I’m here with Techno, Eret. We were at the task force, so we’re still trying to get over there. Oh, fuck, Techno-! Sorry. These mercenaries are giving us shit. We’re coming as fast as we fucking can.”*

“No!” Eret blurted.

Philza fell silent, and Rhodys's worry grew, so Eret took a deep breath. This was the worst possible time to fall into old habits. He could still hear Kan Bo Salem's warnings not to get overwhelmed in a fight, and, well – his old master had been right.

“Be cautious on your approach,” Eret corrected himself, letting out a deep breath. Inhale. Exhale. Focus on what he *could* deal with. “There's some sort of shield surrounding our enemies. There's AT-TEs, droids, and more of the mercenaries you're dealing with. And-” Eret took another deep breath. “-a lot of Jedi are already dead. Rhodys and I can't see beyond the dead zone, so I don't know who's dead.”

Philza was quiet for a long, long moment.

*“Fuck, fuck, fuck. Okay, Techno and I are almost there. Fuck, yeah, I can feel the dead zone. And I see you and Rhodys. Look up.”*

Eret did, and he found Philza and Techno gazing down at him from a building to his left. After staring at the dead zone for however many minutes, their Force presences made Eret a little dizzy. Blood red and brilliant green whirled around them in ferocious figure-8s. Their power was so poignant, so focused, that it made their forms a little blurry at the edges.

“Gods, they're strong,” Rhodys mumbled, as if they'd heard Eret's observation. “But what can they do here? I know we have blasters, but they're all in the armory. We don't have time to get them.”

Eret gritted his teeth and expanded his mind out again, taking in all the information he could. Most of the mercenaries and droids had already dispersed throughout the Temple. They would have to be dealt with case-by-case. Only the AT-TEs and some guards still lumbered through the Gardens, but the Temple would be reduced to rubble once the enforcers got close to the main buildings.

*Think, think, think*, Eret told himself harshly. It was too loud, too much, too *everything*. He survived each day because things were never so frantic. He could tune out the Force presences that didn't matter and only focus on his immediate surroundings. Now, he felt *everything*.

Kabo would know what to do. Kabo hadn't been able to finish Eret's training before his interest in the lifestyle of a Gray Jedi had gotten him exiled. For that, Eret had never really forgiven him.

“Eret? Eret, were you listening to me?”

Shit. He was on the verge of a complete mental shutdown.

Eret took one last deep breath. Then he collapsed all the constructs he usually maintained. His scope of vision narrowed to Techno and Philza, still standing to his left, and Rhodys right in front of him.

It felt like he was stuck in a little black box. But he could think clearly again.

“Sorry,” Eret rasped, and he gave Rhodys a weak smile. “No, I wasn't. What did you say?”

Rhodys frowned but didn't press the subject. With his narrowed range of focus, Eret could see the way the Trandoshan's brow furrowed, the way their hand twitched as if they wanted to comfort him. In another life, he might have welcomed it.

“This must be Antfrost's doing, no?” Rhodys posed hesitantly. “We ran into the same kind of Force shield at Aries's factory, and it broke as soon as he realized that we were tracking him. Its structure must be directly tied to his stability.”

Of course. How had Eret forgotten? Rhodys had had to guide him through the first several hallways of the factory before a flare of alarm had exploded nearby, and the shields had shattered. If Antfrost was maintaining the dead zone, then all they had to do was incapacitate him.

“Philza,” Eret said hurriedly, pressing his earpiece once again. “Can you see Antfrost anywhere? He has to be somewhere in the middle so he can maintain the dead zone's perimeter.”

Philza hummed in response, and Eret barely bit back a command to search fast. That wouldn't help anything.

*“Can't see him. Hang on, we're gonna get to higher ground.”*

Techno and Philza's Force presences vanished beyond Eret's range of sight. Eret sighed a heavy sigh and slumped back against the pillar. There were still mercenaries and droids outside of the dead zone; he could feel them. Eret knew he had to get up and fight. But he was so, so tired. Overstimulation was a hell of a thing to deal with, let alone in the middle of combat.

“How did you know where Antfrost will be?”

That was Rhodys, distinctly curious.

Usually, Eret wouldn't have answered such a question. The less people knew about how much he knew, the better. But his secrecy was what had kept Antfrost protected, and Eret was tired of the rest of the Council pointing their collective finger at him whenever there was a problem. So he smiled wryly, then said,

“Kan Bo Salem told me. He taught me quite a bit about the Force, and I have no doubt that Antfrost gained the same knowledge on his off-planet missions.”

The Trandoshan was quiet. Somehow, their silent musings fueled Eret's tired muscles, and he got to his feet with a grunt. Rhodys instantly glanced back at him.

“Look,” Eret said heavily, “I know I've never been honest or open with you. Or anyone. We can discuss my resignation after this is over.”

Rhodys's frown deepened. “Eret, I-”

Eret didn't wait to hear it. He drew his lightsaber, expanded his mind once again, and stepped out from behind the pillar. Instantly, half a dozen guns and knives turned towards him. Each was outlined by the Force.

*Here we go*, Eret thought, and he tightened his grip on his lightsaber.

The first laser bolt hurtled towards him. Eret dodged it in a burst of speed.

When Salem had first introduced Eret to Juyo, he'd rejected it. He'd considered it as "dirty" as Vaapad, even more so given its Sith origin. But, just like everything else when it came to Kabo, the form had slowly grown on Eret. He'd grown to love its "dirty" tricks, the way he could meld Ataru and Juyo together and develop his own form that emphasized both grace and power. Over the years, he'd forced himself to strictly adhere to his mutant lightsaber form.

Now, Eret launched into battle with Juyo as his sole form.

Darkness crept into the corners of Eret's mind, asking him if he wanted to blow all these intruders away with a flick of his finger. *No*, Eret responded wearily. *I only want to defend the Temple.*

The Light Side begged Eret to move away from Juyo, to use Ataru and take his opponents down without harming them. *No*, Eret thought again, racing towards the nearest mercenary. *Peace cannot resolve this fight.*

Eret ducked under the mercenary's quick blade strike, then drove his heel into their knee. They went down with a scream, and Eret struck their temple with the hilt of his lightsaber. Their unconscious body hit the ground with a *thud*.

Each confrontation was equally short. Eret dashed from enemy to enemy, calling on the Force to grant him both speed and power. His lightsaber carved through both flesh and ground, removing limbs and throwing up dust. Eret was by no means fighting "honorably." But it was efficient. He deflected laser bolts without a glance, and none of the droids stood a chance when faced with his lightsaber.

Then someone landed a blow on his back, and Eret spun around, instinctively assessing the damage. A long-distance attack, probably from a thrown chunk of rubble. No blood.

"You! Jedi! Why don't you give up and spare yourself the trouble! We'll own this place in *hours*!"

Eret extended his mind to the particularly bold mercenary who'd interrupted his flow. A Twi'lek, dressed in the flowing garments Eret had come to associate with the anti-Jedi mercenaries. She brandished a high-power slingshot, and a knife sat in her belt.

She should have picked the knife.

"Well?" the Twi'lek called, and triumph laced her voice. "I know you lot don't like violence, so I'll give you a chance to—"

Eret leaped toward the Twi'lek, and the Force lent him a burst of speed. Her first panicked shot sailed over his head, and Eret dropped into a roll, easily dodging the second. When he stood, he was basically face-to-face with the mercenary.

She wheezed when the hilt of his lightsaber drove into her stomach. The wheeze turned into a pained cough as he jabbed rigid fingers into her neck, sending her tumbling to the ground.

*I have a lot of mediation to do later*, Eret thought tiredly, and he gave his surroundings a cursory scan. No new enemies nearby. They were either scattered around the Temple or hidden within Antfrost's shield.

...or on the ground behind Eret.

Eret frowned, then turned, narrowing his range of vision as he went. Rhodys stood a few meters away, carefully checking the pulse of a mercenary on the ground.

“When did you get there?” Eret asked, bewildered.

Rhodys glanced up at him. A faint smile touched their face. “I couldn't leave your back exposed, could I?” they said quietly. “It's my job to defend this Temple, just the same as you.”

From someone else, Eret might have scowled at the “leave your back exposed” comment. But coming from Rhodys, it felt strangely genuine. So Eret hesitated a moment, then smiled back. The Trandoshan had done nothing but surprise him since they'd joined the Council a few weeks previous.

Then Eret's earpiece crackled to life, and he zeroed in on the voice in his ear.

*“Alright, Techno and I can see Antfrost. He's right in the middle, just like you said. He's fucking surrounded by Aries's men. Where are you now?”*

“Below,” Eret reported. He glanced over his shoulder, and after a moment of searching, Techno's and Philza's Force presences lit up in the distance. Their power was no less overwhelming. “What are you thinking? I can't go in there, and I'm not asking Rhodys to risk their life on a suicide mission.”

*“You two don't have to do anything. Are you still practiced in Ataru?”*

Eret frowned. “Of course. Why?”

*“Techno and I are going to confuse Antfrost. Be ready to strike.”*

Philza's meager explanation provided no clarification, but the other Jedi Master wouldn't act without some semblance of a plan. So Eret just crouched low, turned his lightsaber on once again, and shouted to Rhodys.

“Back up!” he ordered. “I don't know what they're going to do!”

Rhodys didn't move. Something in Eret's chest did a strange flip, and after a moment, he realized he felt... protected. Like he had an ally at his side.

Then Techno and Philza flew towards the dead zone, and Eret ran out of time to think.

Every muscle twitched as he waited for the opening. He knew precisely where Antfrost would be standing; he'd calculated the width and depth of the dead zone as soon as he'd laid eyes on it. The Force thrummed around him, waiting for his command. But it was also being pulled away from him as if sucked by a whirlwind.

Eret had never been good at controlling his curiosity. He siphoned off a little attention to reach out with the Force, just enough to watch whatever Techno and Philza were doing.

Oh. *Shit.*

The pair was running circles around the dead zone, and they tossed their Force presences between each other. Both men were all but shadows in Eret's vision. Logically, he knew they would be on opposite sides of the dead zone at all times. But, through the Force, it looked like they were teleporting. One second, they were apart, then they stood next to each other, then they were both gone.

Footsteps suddenly crunched up next to Eret, and he turned his minimal attention to Rhodys.

“How are they doing that?” the Trandoshan asked. They almost sounded reverent.

Eret allowed himself a wan smile. “Techno brought Philza back from the dead. A bond like that surpasses what we know about the Force and how it can be used. They have access to a whole new dimension of abilities that we can't possibly imagine.”

Rhodys inhaled, probably to make a comment about bonds. But, at that moment, the shields dropped.

It was only for a second. Antfrost was clearly disoriented by the rapid changes, and it was only reasonable that he would take a beat to recenter himself.

But that second was all Eret needed.

The Force burst beneath his heels, thrusting him forward. He charged towards the cat Jedi, lightsaber raised, adrenaline pounding in his veins. The shields returned almost instantly, but Eret had Antfrost's position fixed in his mind. He didn't need to see for a show like this.

Kan Bo Salem, cheerfully waving goodbye as he departed the Temple.

Tubbo's exhausted, teary eyes as he watched Tommy leave for the Underworld.

Sapnap, writhing in pain as Delphina carved a piece of his face away, leaving him with another scar across his face and eyesight that would never be the same.

*This is for everyone you've hurt with your treachery,* Eret thought, and for just a moment, he embraced the anger festering in his heart. *This is for making me your scapegoat.*

He planted his feet, raised his lightsaber, and brought the hilt down hard.

It connected.

When Antfrost cried out in pain, Eret knew he'd succeeded. The shields instantly dropped, and as Antfrost's body hit the ground, Eret saw everything – the mercenaries shouting orders, the droids squawking at each other, and the AT-TEs that were rotating their top gunners to face him.

But a bright yellow Force presence was also charging in from the far side of the former dead zone, roaring as only a Trandoshan could. And, from the other side, blood red and brilliant green launched into battle with a power stronger than the sun.

And none of his friends' bodies laid at his feet.

Eret raised his lightsaber and charged towards the nearest AT-TE.

*I might not survive this day. But I will be damned if I don't stop these fuckers from marching in here unopposed.*

A platoon of droids clanked into Eret's path. He disassembled them all with a few clean strikes.

*I can't call myself a Jedi after this. But this is my fucking home.*

From somewhere behind him, Rhodys's Force presence glowed an even brighter yellow, and the sound of droids clattering to the ground followed it. Pride swelled in Eret's chest.

And, as Eret stepped over the bodies of the fallen Jedi, he welcomed the Force echoes that reverberated in his mind. He accepted their anger, peace, silent wishes, and deepest fears, and he

released all of it into the Force.

*I will die before I let Aries take this Temple.*

---

The surgeon's hands trembled, and Wilbur bit back a cry of pain as electricity jittered his legs. Tommy, however, seemed to have no problem with expressing his anger.

“What the fuck are you doing?” the boy hissed, and the surgeon's already pale face turned an even lighter shade of blue. “You're not even doing it right! The nerve endings should be-”

“Shut up, Tommy,” Wilbur grit out. “You wouldn't be able to fucking do this.”

Tommy shot him an incredulous look, but the surgeon offered a relieved glance before turning back to Wilbur's legs. Even though he'd defended them, it took all of Wilbur's self-control not to scream as the surgeon's hands shook yet again and lit his nerves up like fireworks. Maybe he would prefer that Tommy completed this surgery. At least his padawan's hands were steady.

Not that he blamed the surgeon for their unease.

The current siege was so far beyond anything that anyone had ever expected. The Angel Wing was in shambles. Between the mercenaries running free in the main corridors and laser fire from somewhere far away, chaos reigned supreme. It was a wonder the surgeons and doctors on duty hadn't abandoned their patients to save their own lives. They hadn't been trained for combat, after all.

A deep rumble suddenly shook the building, and the surgeon yelped, throwing their tools into the tray and backing away. This time, Wilbur couldn't stifle a hiss as electricity from the exposed connections skittered up his legs.

“I'm sorry,” the surgeon stuttered out. “G-good luck, Master Jedi!”

With that, they turned and fled Wilbur's room.

Tommy followed them, bellowing obscenities, but Wilbur didn't bother getting angry. He just sank onto his bed, closing his eyes and reaching out through the Force. Even though he'd never been exceptionally gifted, he felt the pandemonium and death ringing through the whole Temple. From what little Tommy had told him, buildings were collapsing, grenades were going off everywhere, and enemy forces had swept through the entire Temple.

The Angel Wing rumbled once again. Wilbur decided to ignore it.

“Hey, kid! Is there-”

A lightsaber carved through the air, and Wilbur sat bolt upright, suddenly panicked because *did Tommy just kill someone?* But his fear was unfounded. Tommy's lightsaber burned a brilliant blue in the shadows of the hallway, and a mercenary was crumpled at the padawan's feet.

“I don't know how long he'll be out!” Tommy shouted, and he rushed back into the room. Thinly veiled panic colored his Force presence in uneven patches. “Will, we have to fucking go.”

Dark spots swam before Wilbur's eyes, and he shook his head to clear them. Being dragged back to consciousness with a shot of adrenaline had its downsides. On the one hand, Wilbur was aware enough to feel pain and understand that the Temple was fucked and everything was going to hell.

On the other, he couldn't focus on anything, and he was barely strong enough to prop himself up on his elbows.

Let alone crawl out of the Angel Wing with danger coming from every side and no legs.

“Wilbur?”

Wilbur shook his head again, and this time, the pain from his headache chased away his grogginess. “I know, I know,” he muttered. Tommy was crumpled at Wilbur's side, his knuckles white on the railings of the bed. Wilbur desperately wished he could offer any sort of hope. “Alright, here's what we're gonna do,” he decided. “There's wheelchairs in the storage room. Go get one of those while I try to wake up enough to stand and shit.”

Tommy stared at him for a beat. Then the padawan nodded several too many times and raced for the door, banging his shoulder on the doorframe as he barreled out.

As soon as Tommy disappeared into the hallway, Wilbur let out a pained gasp. Gods, it felt like someone had hooked his legs up to a 20-volt battery. Well, technically, that was exactly what had happened. To activate his new prosthetics (which laid on a trolley to his right), the surgeon should have attached electrical convertors to what remained of his nerve endings, then connected those convertors to the prosthetics. In essence, they needed to amplify his body's natural electrical current, so he could move his new legs.

But since the surgeon had fucking abandoned him, he was left with an amplified current and nothing to dilute the pain. Under normal circumstances, he should have been unconscious for this surgery.

*Don't blame them, Wilbur thought sternly. None of our workers are trained to work under this kind of fucking pressure.*

His mental rebuke did nothing to stop his legs from twitching uncontrollably and his mouth from going dry.

Wilbur fisted his hands in the bedsheets. *Where are you?* he called to Tommy, praying his agony didn't transmit.

*In the storage room. There isn't any fucking shit in here, and I-*

*That's okay. Try somewhere else.*

*It's not fucking okay! Nothing about this is fucking **okay** !*

Tommy's voice was shrill, even over their bond. Wilbur pressed his lips together. His calmness was a byproduct of the pain meds still active in his bloodstream, and in a couple of minutes, he'd probably start feeling a little panicked. But Tommy? Tommy had been awake since the very first attack. He'd been the one to forcibly wake Wilbur up, driving the adrenaline shot into Wilbur's thigh and shaking him back to awareness.

Tommy had been awake for a long time. He'd been awake for the factory raid while Wilbur had drooled on the floor. He'd saved them both, and through it all, Wilbur had been asleep.

*No!* Wilbur snapped. He physically slapped himself across the face, and the sting cut through his thoughts like a hot knife. *I'm here now! How do I get Tommy out of this alive?*

The easiest solution was to send his padawan away. But Wilbur knew Tommy would never

abandon him, even under threat of death. Hell, the boy had hefted them over a lake of lava, even though his survival would have been all but guaranteed if he'd let Wilbur go. Even if the thought had crossed Tommy's mind, he hadn't acted on it.

So that took “go without me” out of the picture. Running wasn't much of an option either, given Wilbur couldn't *even fucking walking*. Their last option was a wheelchair since Tommy wasn't strong enough to carry Wilbur. But if-

An unfamiliar, golden Force presence suddenly swept through the door, and Wilbur snapped to attention, instinctively reaching for his lightsaber – which wasn't there anymore, since Quackity had taken them. But the man that entered the room didn't seem to be a threat. He wore a nurse's apron, and he held what looked like two stilts in his hands.

“Master Wilbur?” the man asked. Wilbur nodded once, and the nurse's pace quickened. “My name is Endo Nok'tara. I can't give you the advanced prosthetics we planned to implement, but I can give you legs.”

Wilbur nodded again, too confused to offer any verbal confirmation. Endo grabbed two thin tools from the tray, dumped two legs on the bed next to Wilbur, then began fiddling with his convertors. Wilbur couldn't help a sigh of relief as his nerve ends finally stopped firing.

For a few minutes, the room was silent. The Temple kept rumbling around them, and occasionally, a chunk of rubble crashed down in the hallway. Throughout it all, Endo didn't flinch. He didn't even look away.

There was something strangely familiar about the man. Endo's hair was strawberry blond, pulled back in a tight ponytail, and pale blue eyes flicked back and forth across Wilbur's amputated knees. The fact that he had nerves of steel was bizarre enough, but-

The penny dropped, and Wilbur's stomach clenched.

“Nok'tara,” he whispered. “You're Val's fiancé, aren't you?”

Endo's hands froze. Then he resumed his work, just as steady as before. “I didn't expect you to remember his last name,” the nurse murmured. “But, yes. I was. We worked together here since we both had a passion for helping people.”

The golden Force presence surrounding Endo wavered. Before Wilbur could express his condolences, thank Endo for helping, or even just come up with something to say, Tommy burst back into the room.

“I couldn't find a fucking wheelchair anywhere, and I even tried that huge community center. It's all so fucking stupid, but we can-” Tommy's gaze landed on Endo, hunched at the foot of Wilbur's bed, and fear flared around him. “Will! Are you-”

“I'm fine,” Wilbur cut in quickly. “This is Nurse Nok'tara. I trust him.” *He's Val's fiancé*, he added through their bond.

For a moment, Tommy just stared at him. Then understanding spread across his face. *That's the nurse that died, right? The one that visited Tubbo in the infirmary a lot.*

*Yeah.*

*Oh. Shit.*



The exchange was so casual, Wilbur almost laughed. But the rumblings were too strong to ignore, and a million emotions lapped at the edges of his mind.

Endo suddenly grabbed one of the legs he'd set on Wilbur's bed, and the flurry of movement drew Wilbur's attention to the legs themselves. He hadn't given them a second thought since Endo's appearance had been significantly more jarring than what he'd brought along. But now that Wilbur was looking closely... they looked like droid legs, pulled from the myriad of droids that Tommy had felled outside of Wilbur's room. They were little more than strips of metal that curved back, then jutted forward to form a "foot."

As if he'd heard Wilbur's silent line of questioning, Endo glanced up at him. "Yes, these are droid legs," the nurse said. "They're simpler than regular prosthetics, so I can complete the surgery quicker. The longer you're stuck here, the worse your chances of survival are."

Something about the blunt statement made Wilbur smile.

Ten minutes ticked by without event. The laser bolts pummeling the walls of the Angel Wing grew louder, as did the tremors, but Endo didn't pause for anything. The nurse's steadfastness grounded Wilbur more than he wanted to admit. Endo was giving him a chance to escape.

Finally, Endo straightened. "Sit up and stand," he ordered.

Wilbur didn't like looking down and seeing droid legs. Scratch that – he hated it. But he was hardly in a position to complain, so Wilbur tossed his new prosthetics over the edge of his bed and heaved himself upright. His knees instantly buckled, and he toppled forward.

"Shit!" Wilbur hissed, desperately throwing out his hands to catch himself. Pain throbbed up his legs (as well as from his bashed nose), and when Tommy materialized at his side, Wilbur accepted his padawan's helping hand. "Was that supposed to happen?" Wilbur asked, shooting Endo a wry smile.

The nurse returned it wearily. "Yes. You should be undergoing weeks of physical therapy to acclimate to your prosthetics, and your nerve conductors aren't perfect. But you can walk."

Wilbur heard the unspoken second half of that sentence. *So you can escape.*

"Thank you," he murmured, and Endo nodded once, turning to leave. "Wait. Why? Why help me instead of saving yourself?"

*We don't have time for this,* Tommy thought frantically, but Wilbur held up a silencing hand.

Endo was quiet for a moment. Then the nurse met Wilbur's gaze, and for just a moment, Wilbur felt all the rage and sadness that haunted the man's mind. "Val and I were dedicated to helping people," Endo said quietly. "And if he were still here, he'd be right here with me, saving as many lives as we could. Do me a favor, Master Wilbur. Don't forget about either of us."

Wilbur swallowed. "I won't."

"Thank you."

Then Endo was gone, striding out the door with his tools in hand. Wilbur sent a silent prayer after the nurse.

*If any gods are listening, keep him safe. He deserves to live.*

The Temple rumbled again, and Wilbur set his melancholy aside for a later date. “Come on,” he urged Tommy. His padawan instantly wrapped an arm under Wilbur's shoulders, and together, they began hobbling out of the room. Wilbur stumbled on each step, and Tommy swore under his breath every time a wave of emotions rippled through the Force. But they didn't stop.

*How are we going to get out of this?* Wilbur asked himself as he and Tommy limped down the Angel Wing's main hallway. Bodies of nurses and patients lined the rubble-filled corridor. Wilbur tried not to look at any of them too closely.

But, right next to the main doors, Wilbur caught sight of a blue-skinned hand and a familiar face. He quickly dragged Tommy past the felled nurse.

They stepped out of the Angel Wing to a hellscape.

From as high up as they were, Wilbur could see the entire Temple. The southern wing had been demolished, and smoke billowed from pillars of fire. Multicolored laser bursts flashed through the Gardens and between buildings, armored AT-TEs marched from between the destroyed Temple Gates, and the Force-

Gods, the Force felt as physical as the smoke in the air. It writhed like a being in pain, howling from the emotions being poured into it.

Tommy suddenly swayed on his feet. *Will*, he mumbled through their bond, *it hurts. It- it hurts.*

The blond boy tilted, and Wilbur frantically lowered his padawan to the ground. Balancing on his new stilts made Wilbur's quads scream, but thanks to his prosthetic knees, he couldn't feel the roughness of the cobblestones. He couldn't feel anything below his aching muscles.

Not the time. Not the time.

“What hurts, Tommy?” Wilbur murmured. His padawan's eyes were glazed with pain, and Wilbur gently rested a hand against Tommy's cheek. It was more out of instinct than any sort of medical intent. But Tommy instantly leaned into his touch, his eyes squeezing shut, and Wilbur's heart twisted.

*Hurt*, Tommy whispered again through their bond.

The single word did nothing to help Wilbur understand *why* Tommy was hurting. But at that moment, it didn't matter. His padawan had dragged them both out of hell, and now, it was Wilbur's turn to keep them alive. His legs be damned, and the Force be damned, Wilbur was going to save Tommy.

So he reached through their bond, pushing his padawan's thoughts aside until he found a tangled web of pain wrapped tightly around Tommy's very core. Wilbur grabbed the strands and pulled without a second thought.

The first thing Wilbur felt was agony. The second was a numbing surge of cold, and the third was nausea strong enough to make him choke.

But Wilbur's sensitivity to the Force was lesser than Tommy's. The sensations dimmed as his brain realized that it physically couldn't process them, and though Tommy fed him a constant stream of pain, Wilbur wrestled the feelings into submission. Whatever it took to keep Tommy clear-headed and alert.

When Wilbur pried his eyes open, he found clear, blue eyes staring back at him.

“Will-” Tommy started, voice trembling.

“Shut up,” Wilbur interrupted gently. “I’m going to get you out of here.”

“How?”

How, indeed. Wilbur lifted his head over the edge of the bridge's wall and gazed down at the utter destruction being wrought. There was so much damage. So much pain. So much death, so much power, and so much unavoidable carnage.

Aries's vendetta had come with a vengeance. Wilbur still didn't understand what had driven the mob boss to such lengths, but he knew what would come of it. Aries wouldn't stop until he'd razed the entire Temple to the ground, or he was dead.

Those weren't odds Wilbur could take.

He glanced back down at Tommy. The boy seemed so small, slumped against the wall with blood smeared across his forehead. For a split second, Wilbur saw a younger Tommy. When they'd first met, he'd seen the indomitable energy and life in his new padawan's heart. Wilbur had made a silent vow that he wouldn't let Tommy be crushed the way the Order had crushed *him*. He had refused to let the cruelty of the world twist his padawan beyond repair.

“We're leaving,” Wilbur whispered.

Tommy blinked. “What?”

“I know you don't want to.” Wilbur took a deep, deep breath, and before he could stop himself, he grabbed Tommy's hands. “I don't want to either. But I can't protect you here. I can barely walk, and there's no fucking way that Aries is going to let us live a second time. And I-”

A ball of emotion lodged itself in Wilbur's throat, turning his words into a choked sob. He closed his eyes briefly. He *had* to be strong enough to see this through.

“We can't save anyone if we're dead,” Wilbur continued softly. He struggled to keep his voice level, especially once he noticed the tears gathering in Tommy's eyes. “Please, Tommy, we have to leave. I can't- I can't let you die.”

They stared at each other for a long, long moment. Silent tears streamed down Tommy's cheeks, and through their bond, the blond boy desperately reached out. Wilbur responded by wrapping his Force presence around Tommy's as tightly as he could. It was all he could offer without breaking this moment.

Then Tommy lunged forward, clinging to Wilbur's robes and burying his face in Wilbur's shoulder. “We're going to die,” the boy whispered. His words were broken up by quiet hiccups, and his whole body shook. “Will, we're gonna die.”

Wilbur caught his padawan and tugged Tommy into his arms. The boy went without complaint, curling against Wilbur's chest and tucked his head under Wilbur's chin.

“No,” Wilbur murmured into Tommy's hair. “I promised I would keep you safe, and that's what I'm going to do. We're going to make it out of this. You're going to see tomorrow's sunrise, I promise.”

Tommy didn't respond. But his Force presence latched onto Wilbur's, and Wilbur took that as affirmation. He inhaled deeply, gathering all his strength. Then Wilbur rose to his feet. Knives

instantly stabbed into the bottom of his biological legs, and he was as unsteady as a newborn. But he could walk. So, fueled by the determination to *save Tommy*, Wilbur started towards the medical center below them.

Smoke had formed a canopy over the Temple. Explosive laser bolts crashed into buildings around them, sending chunks of stone and destroyed vines flying everywhere. But Wilbur kept walking.

Somewhere along his trek, Wilbur reached out to the Force. Even though it coiled like a spitting snake, he still begged for its power to balance his body, to lend him strength.

*Please*, Wilbur whispered, pressing a barely-there kiss into Tommy's dusty hair. *Please let me save him.*

And for the first time in his life, the Force responded to his call.

---

Antfrost gasped.

A cool breeze drifted across his face, and he launched back into consciousness. His eyes flew open, and he realized he was sprawled on the ground, his face pressed against cold dirt. Blood dripped from somewhere, and... and...

He smelled smoke.

Memories returned to Antfrost in chaotic flashes. Schlatt showing up at Antfrost's safe house in the Lower District, shooting him a predatory grin and telling him to get ready. Quackity, arriving half an hour later with an entire army of mercenaries at his back. The trek to the Temple. Raising the shields over the mercenaries.

The horror that had punched through Antfrost's chest when he saw the AT-TEs. The way he'd almost thrown up when the MTTs had landed, deploying hundreds and hundreds of droids.

Antfrost had watched the first line of Jedi fall, too. Once the AT-TEs had demolished the Temple Gates, Schlatt had waved a hand at the advancing troops, ordering Antfrost to stay and keep the Force shields up. He'd wanted the AT-TEs' heavy-duty plating and monstrous laser cannons to be fully utilized.

*"The Jedi are powerless without the Force,"* Schlatt had added with a chuckle. He'd glanced up at Quackity then, nodding for the Night Thief to begin his part of the plan. Quackity had dashed away with an answering nod and a smirk.

Antfrost should have backed out then. He should have waited for Schlatt to disappear, then left the Temple. If he'd disappeared, then Aries would have lost one of his most valuable assets – a Jedi.

But Antfrost had stood his ground. He'd watched as other Jedi had charged towards Aries's men, only to stumble as the Force abandoned them. He'd watched them look around wildly, then desperately begin defending themselves against the onslaught of droids and mercenaries that crashed on them like rolling waves.

He'd watched them die.

Bile suddenly gathered in Antfrost's throat, and he clamped a hand over his mouth, pushing himself to his knees with his free hand. Once his head stopped spinning, and he didn't feel like throwing up, Antfrost looked up.

His first thought was that he'd moved. He'd been tossed away from the center of his shield's radius, though he couldn't quite remember how.

His second was that, oh, shit, his shield was down.

His third...

The Temple was destroyed.

Six of the ten AT-TEs had been felled, and they laid in smoking heaps across the Gardens. But beyond the Gardens, the remaining four marched on. Fires raged, people screamed, and the Force rippled like a lake displaced by a gigantic boulder. Even from where he sat, Antfrost could see at least five buildings that were little more than rubble.

"It's gone," Antfrost mumbled.

His words came out slurred and weak, and his voice sounded foreign to his own ears. Did he have a concussion? It didn't matter. The Temple was up in flames.

*This is what I wanted. This is what I've wanted for so, so long.*

So why didn't it feel like victory?

Something exploded nearby, and Antfrost felt a wave of heat and Force power as both mercenaries and Jedi screamed in pain. He tried to look at the disaster, but his thoughts were too... disjointed. Broken. He couldn't focus on anything, let alone figure out what he was looking at. Everything was ash and soot and fire and pain and-

This wasn't right. Antfrost had called the Temple his home for years, and... he'd wrought the destruction of his *home*.

And for what? A twisted sense of revenge.

*It was worth it, part of Antfrost's mind spat. No one understands. None of them saw it. None of them saw what happened.*

But Antfrost had seen it. Every last part.

---

*Jedi rushed around, their multicolored robes billowing from the cool night breeze drifting through the open archways. Antfrost recoiled further into the shadows. Since he was perched on top of a pillar, no one had noticed him. But there was always a chance that someone would. And if someone spotted him, Antfrost would probably be tossed from the building until the High Council had finished their meeting.*

*That just couldn't happen. Antfrost had felt the ripples of George's hysteria as soon as the other padawan had returned to the Temple, and when Cho-Nal's thunderous rage had appeared, Antfrost had made a decision. No matter what had happened, he would be there to make sure George was okay.*

*A flare of panic exploded from within the High Council's chambers. Antfrost cringed, and below, several Jedi paused. They shot each other nervous glances. Then the doors began to open, and everyone rushed away. Clearly, no one wanted to be caught eavesdropping.*

*Antfrost didn't move. He leaned forward, desperately trying to see who was leaving.*

*George. George shuffled out of the High Council's chambers, head down, expelling his emotions into the Force with a desperation that only worsened his state. The door instantly slammed behind him, and George yelped, stumbling on his next step.*

*Not good, not good, not good-*

*Antfrost leaped down from his hiding place and dashed forward, catching George just before the shorter padawan hit the ground. "I've got you," Antfrost said frantically, carefully lowering his friend to his knees. "What happened?"*

*Even without a word, Antfrost realized things were more serious than he'd thought. George's pale face was blotchy and stained with tears, and his dark eyes were red-rimmed.*

*"What happened?" Antfrost asked again, half out of horror, half out of concern.*

*George sniffled, hiccuped, and looked up. Anger welled up in Antfrost's chest at George's broken gaze.*

*"I'm being exiled."*

*A beat. Antfrost's brain worked at double speed, trying to process what George had just said, because padawans weren't exiled. That wasn't something that happened, especially not to George, who was always so kind and friendly and-*

*"I'm being exiled, Ant," George repeated, even shakier than the first time.*

*The other padawan took a deep breath, and for a moment, Antfrost thought his friend would be okay. Then George dissolved into hysterical tears. He slumped forward, collapsing against Antfrost's chest, and Antfrost felt tears prick at his own eyes. He wrapped his arms fiercely around George, pulling his friend as close as he could. George buried his face in Antfrost's shoulder with a sob.*

*Antfrost didn't understand. George was a golden student. Sure, Clay got all the attention, but George was just as strong with the Force. George was talented, and he helped people, and- and-*

*Exile. Exile was permanent. Exile was reserved for Jedi who had broken the Code irreparably, and the last person Antfrost remembered being exiled was Master Kan Bo Salem. He'd understood the grounds for exile even less back then, but in those years since Master Salem's departure, no one had heard a word from him.*

*Was Antfrost going to lose George like that, too?*

*"What am I supposed to do, Ant?" George sobbed, his voice still muffled by Antfrost's shoulder. His grip on Antfrost's robes tightened, and Antfrost folded himself protectively around his friend. "I can't survive out there. I- I don't have any credits, and I won't have any food, and where am I supposed to go? Everyone is going to know my name!"*

*"It's okay," Antfrost soothed. But he didn't believe himself, and he desperately wracked his brain for a way to make things better. Nothing came to mind. "Listen, I've been saving up the credits I've earned from all my odds jobs. I'm on assignment out in the Mechanical District, remember? You can have all of it. And I can sneak into the kitchens! When-" Antfrost swallowed. He didn't want to ask this question. "When are you leaving?"*

*George wilted even more. "Tomorrow. I have to be out by tomorrow morning."*

*Oh, fuck.*

*Antfrost carefully untangled his friend from his arms, holding George by his biceps. "Why don't you go see Clay?" he suggested gently. "You can brainstorm with him while I get the credits and food for you. Maybe you won't have to go that far away!"*

*It was a bandaid solution, and Antfrost knew it. But it was better than leaving George with nothing to do but sit here and wallow. Antfrost heaved a silent sigh of relief as a fraction of the hopelessness in George's eyes faded.*

*"Okay," the other padawan rasped. "I will. I'll- I'll meet you at his room."*

*Antfrost nodded encouragingly. "Great. I'll be fast."*

*George nodded in response, so Antfrost scrambled to his feet and took off down the suddenly deserted hallway. Years later, Antfrost would wonder why all the Jedi Masters that had been running midnight errands had disappeared once George had emerged. Maybe they hadn't wanted to see what their own Council had decreed. But, at the time, Antfrost had a tunnel focus on his tasks: get his credits and get food.*

*Nausea and worry curled in his stomach as he sprinted through the moonlight Temple. This wasn't right. It couldn't be. Exile wasn't supposed to happen to padawans, especially not ones that weren't Sith. George wasn't a Sith!*

*So... why? Why had the Council turned on him?*

*Half an hour later, Antfrost scrambled towards Clay's room, weighed down by a packed sack. He'd filled said sack with as many preserved foods and cans as it could carry, and his credits sat in a small box, buried beneath all the food. George would be well-fed for at least a few weeks. Antfrost prayed it would be enough.*

*He swung around the last corner, already inhaling for Clay to open the door.*

*Then Antfrost was struck in the face by a horrible wave of emotion, and he recoiled, dropping to his knees with a gasp. Rage, so much anger, fear, hate, misery, more fear-*

*I'm drowning, Antfrost thought hysterically, and he frantically tightened his mental shields. He'd never been the most talented at mental shields, but necessity provided him more power than usual. After a few painful seconds, the wave receded from Antfrost's mind. He could think straight again.*

*With the clarity came anxiety. Who was shedding those emotions? Clay's master, Tengel, was running errands, and George should be the only one around.*

*Only... George...*

*Oh, no. No, no, no-*

*Ever so carefully, Antfrost lowered his mental shields. He winced at the immediate onslaught, but now that he was focused, he could pick out the Force presences behind the emotional duel. Bright blue and emerald green. George and Clay.*

*Antfrost inched closer to Clay's room. The emotions got stronger the closer he got, and with the emotions came voices. Barbed and sharp voices, edged with hysteria and fury and defensiveness*

*and horrible, horrible venom.*

*“-did what I did? Do you think I'm psychotic?”*

*“You have to be! You're a fucking idiot!”*

*“You aren't listening to me!”*

*George, sounding near in tears. And Clay... Antfrost had never heard him so angry.*

*“I did the best that I could! What would you have done in my place? Could you have made a better choice that saved all those people? What the fuck did you expect me to do?!”*

*“I thought you would follow the Code! That's what we're supposed to do!”*

*Something like a sob slipped under the door, and Antfrost clamped a hand over his mouth. Vaguely, he realized he was crying, too. But he kept it all buried in his chest, sliding down the wall until he was slumped on the floor outside of Clay's door.*

*“You're supposed to be on my side, Clay!”*

*“I'm on the side of the High Council! They know better than we do!”*

*“You weren't there! You weren't fucking there! Cho-Nal is supposed to be my master, and he wants to wipe my name from history! I tried! I fucking tried, Clay! Why aren't you with me on this?!”*

*“No, you failed! That wasn't trying; that was giving up on everything we're supposed to stand for! If you had 'tried,' you wouldn't be facing murder charges! How have you deluded yourself into thinking that you're innocent?”*

*“What would you have done?! I'm the great and powerful Clay, and I've never answered to anyone a day in my life! Oh, and how did I forget? I also tell my friends that they deserve to die!”*

*“I never fucking said that!”*

*“You just said that I deserve to be banished! What could you possibly mean by that, if not that you want me dead? Just say what you mean! You always do!”*

*“You know what? You're right! You deserve to be banished! You killed people, George!”*

*After that, Antfrost tuned out the argument until it faded to impressions and feelings. He knew he should move in case one of his friends left the room, but he couldn't get his legs to respond. He couldn't feel anything. Clay... Clay hated George. That wasn't right. They were supposed to be inseparable, best friends through anything. They were supposed to love each other.*

*George suddenly raised his voice, breaking through Antfrost's stupor and sending his heart into overdrive.*

*“You're a coward, Clay!”*

*“Go to hell!”*

*Antfrost finally regained control of his legs, and he launched to his feet, taking off down the hallway with tears still flowing down his cheeks. He tucked himself into the hallway's rafters and clutched his sack to his chest. When George emerged from Clay's room five minutes later, his eyes*



*hard and shoulders rigid, Antfrost didn't move. When Clay slammed the control panel for his door, Antfrost still didn't move. It took him half an hour before he could work up the strength to put on a brave front and seek George out.*

*He found the other padawan sitting on top of the Temple, sobbing once again. Antfrost sat with him for the rest of the night.*

*The following morning at sunrise, George stood before the Temple Gates, Antfrost's sack thrown over his shoulder and his lightsaber clenched in his fist. Cho-Nal stared down at him, impassive. Eventually, George dropped his lightsaber into his former master's hand and turned, striding through the Gates.*

*Just before he disappeared, George glanced back.*

*Antfrost swallowed his tears and raised a hand. He wasn't allowed to interact with George anymore since the other padawan was officially exiled, but he'd still come to see his friend off. Nick stood next to him, stone-faced. The shorter man had only gotten a rushed goodbye, as he'd been fast-asleep until Antfrost had woken him up at 4 am.*

*When George vanished beyond the Temple Gates, Antfrost's tears started again. Nick didn't cry.*

*His tears would come later.*

*The following day, Bad returned from his mission to the Outer Rim, greeting everyone with a smile and cheerfully asking where George was since he'd brought the souvenir the padawan had asked for. Cho-Nal told him. Bad's face went blank.*

*That was the day Antfrost saw the Temple change.*

*When Wilbur returned from his mission with Master Adoli and learned what had happened to George, he flew into a rage. He became obsessive, searching for any traces of his friend. Eventually, he put the fruitless search aside and focused on completing his Trials. But Antfrost saw the tight set to Wilbur's jaw. He knew that the other man never forgave and never forgot.*

*A few days after George's exile, Antfrost sought out Bad to ask about a lesson he'd been taught in Bad's absence. He found the daemon Jedi collapsed in his room, sobbing into his hands. The snow globe Bad had bought for George laid in shattered pieces on the floor. Antfrost left the room without making himself known.*

*Nick lost his childhood the day that George left. His relationship with Master Dashed got even worse, and he threw himself into his training. Nick trained for hours a day, refusing to eat or sleep. Most days, his knuckles and knees bled. When Antfrost finally approached him and begged for his friend to rest, Nick whirled to face him and screamed,*

*"I can't! What if I'm next? What if you're next?! I'm not fucking strong enough to take this shit again, and as long as I'm punching something, I'm useful! I can't lose anyone else, and I-"*

*Nick collapsed to his knees with a sob. It was the first time Antfrost saw the shorter man cry over George.*

*But Clay was the worst. It was the most gradual, but, detached as he was from the rest of the Temple, Antfrost saw it. He saw Clay stew in his anger, watched as his friend was consumed by it. He watched Clay leave at all hours of the day, only to come back hours later with new wounds and an emptiness in his eyes that terrified Antfrost to his core.*

*The day Clay changed forever was when he disappeared for 38 hours, then returned to the Temple with his hands mangled beyond repair and his face cut to pieces. Only an emergency rush to the infirmary had saved his life.*

*Then Clay had created his mask. That day, he became Dream.*

*Antfrost forgave him. After years of dealing with his own anger, he realized that it hadn't been Dream's fault. All of his friends were innocent, byproducts of the cruel circumstances they were thrust into.*

*The ones at fault were the Council. The Council, who hid behind ancient mandates and claimed they were saviors for bringing the Jedi Order back to life. The Council, who had thrown one of their best padawans to the wolves over the letter of the law. The Council, who had turned on their own.*

*And Antfrost let his hatred grow.*

---

Antfrost opened his eyes. In the short time he'd been lost in the past, more fires had erupted. More buildings had collapsed, and more emotions had entered the Force, disrupting it until it flowed like a sound wave. Ash drifted through the air, and almost all the flora in the Gardens had been burnt to a crisp. The Temple looked otherworldly, barren and lifeless.

*George wouldn't want this,* Antfrost realized numbly.

It was a simple concept. If George had wanted revenge, he would have devoted his time to becoming a mob boss, then used his resources to levy an assault on the Temple, just like Aries was currently doing.

But he hadn't. George had tucked himself into a secluded level in the lower 4000s and made a life for himself. He'd made allies, adopted robots, and let the past go.

It was only Antfrost that had refused to move on.

In trying to get revenge, he'd brought George back to the Temple and put him in danger. He'd used each of the weaknesses he'd learned about over the years and used them as pressure points, guiding the Council and the Order into Aries's elaborate scheme.

He'd used his friends as pawns.

Antfrost blinked, and suddenly, he was on his feet, tearing through Aries's forces. A few of the surviving mercenaries shouted after him, but Antfrost ignored them. He cast his mind as far as it could go and prayed that, somehow, the gods would have mercy.

A cluster of Force presences huddled in Dream's room. Emerald green, forest green, amber, and blue.

Dream, Tubbo, Sapnap, and George.

*They're still alive,* Antfrost thought, and he choked back a sob. *They're still alive.*

He couldn't save the Temple. He was damned to whatever hell existed within the Force, and he could live with that. But his friends? They were innocent.

Antfrost had to get them out of the Temple. He had to save them from himself.

## Chapter End Notes

As always, thank you so much for reading! If you enjoyed this chapter, please leave a comment and let me know what you thought! Given that we're approaching this story's end, I'm really curious about how y'all are feeling :D

Until the next chapter!

## Era, Part 3

### Chapter Notes

Hello, my dear readers! Please forgive me if my writing style is a little off; I'm still recovering from a recent minor surgery, and I'm not sure if the pain meds are affecting me lol. Regardless, I hope you enjoy this chapter!

Major TW for mental health issues. Always read safely!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

*Duck.*

Phil instantly dropped, and a Force blast sailed over his head, hitting a mercenary square in the chest and sending them tumbling. Phil let out a sharp breath, then launched back into combat.

*Thanks.*

Techno's only response was a grunt, but Phil hadn't expected any more than that. When they were fighting, all they needed was a few words. Tactics, warnings, and split-second decisions whistled back and forth across their bond, and years of experience allowed Phil to simultaneously tear through the oncoming enemies and listen to Techno's thoughts.

*New wave. Turn.*

Phil planted his foot and pivoted, easily deflecting a laser bolt. He surged forward, leaping between the droids and slicing his lightsaber through their torsos and necks. When Phil glanced over his shoulder, he found a trail of smoking, robotic carnage behind him.

The conditions weren't ideal. Sweat coated the small of Phil's back, half from the smoke filling his lungs, half from the way the Force rippled every time he reached out to it. Such a concentrated area of Jedi using so much of the Force seemed to be stretching it thin.

Or maybe Phil was just tired. Gods knew he hadn't been in good shape *before* this fucking siege had started.

A sixth sense plucked at the back of Phil's mind, and he whipped around, immediately picking out Techno – as well as the ragtag group of mercenaries charging towards him. *Behind you*, Phil called, and just in case Techno couldn't react in time, he started running.

Of course, Techno dealt with the mercenaries long before Phil got there. A brutal Force push and three wide swings put all four mercenaries on the ground.

Techno shot Phil a tired look. *This is ridiculous*, the pig Jedi thought, and even over their bond, his voice was distinctly weary. *We're the only ones out here. Where's everyone else?*

Phil couldn't help a dry chuckle, and he nudged Techno's elbow. “At least we've got Eret and Rhodys,” he offered. “It's better than nothing.”

Techno pursed his lips, but amusement touching their bond. Despite how shitty the situation was, it

was no worse than a million other missions they'd pulled off. Things weren't over until they fell, and so far, they were both still swinging.

But it wasn't the same. It wasn't just Phil and Techno taking risks; everyone's lives were at stake.

And if Phil looked too closely, he saw the bodies piled between the felled AT-TEs. He saw the Force echoes hovering around them, saw the confused souls asking why they couldn't get up.

Phil swallowed. Maybe his joviality was misplaced.

*Another wave. Blade up.*

Techno's voice was strained, so Phil sent what little strength he could spare through their bond before activating his lightsaber. He and Techno had been slowly making their way through the demolished Gardens, picking off any mercenaries that hadn't followed the leading troops. They'd gotten the stragglers' attention at the cost of never-ending waves of new enemies.

A mixed bag of mercenaries and droids raced towards them, blasters, knives, and spears raised.

*Come at us*, Phil thought darkly, and as soon as the first droid came in range, he swung.

Time blended into wet paint. For every mercenary or droid felled by their lightsabers, another took their place. Logically, Phil knew that Aries couldn't have brought a whole fucking army with him, and there *would* be an end to their opponents.

But the end had yet to come.

Phil drove a heavy kick into a mercenary's stomach and quickly skipped out of the way as they tumbled to the ground. He was back-to-back with Techno, and even without turning, he could feel his partner's heaving shoulders. Aries was wearing them thin. Maybe that had been the point. Run the frontlines into the ground, then send in even bigger guns.

Gods. Phil didn't know if he could keep going much longer. And Techno had been right; he, Techno, Eret, and Rhodys were the only Jedi protecting the Temple Gates. The rest were, presumably, tied up in altercations in other parts of the Temple. Four people were not enough for such a big area.

Movement flashed in the corner of Phil's eye. Another batch of mercenaries.

*We've got more*, he announced wearily.

*What a coincidence. They're coming straight for me, too.*

Phil smiled wryly, and ideas flashed between them faster than strikes of lightning. They decided on one, nodded to each other, and took off running.

*Get behind and take them apart. Droids don't know how to turn around, and we're faster than most mercenaries, alien or not.*

The first laser bolt sailed harmlessly over Phil's head, and he dodged the second with a tight roll. The Force propelled him forward as he launched from side to side, weaving through the latest band of enemies with surgical precision. When he reached the back of the group, most of them were still struggling to change direction.

Easy win.

Phil raised his lightsaber and balanced himself, already preparing to sweep his lightsaber in a wide arc. But something stopped him. A tug, a pull, *something* that made him glance up.

Techno stared back at him from across the field. The pig Jedi's lightsaber was lowered, and his eyes were narrowed with confusion.

It wasn't another Jedi. No, the tug Phil felt was from Techno. But that didn't make sense; they'd been bonded for years, and Phil knew Techno's Force presence better than he did their own. Tugs only happened from something new-

Instinct brought Phil's free hand up, and suddenly, he was reaching through the Force. It rippled under his touch, more reactive than he'd ever felt before. His bond with Techno glowed even brighter than usual.

Then the Force all but exploded.

Phil gasped and dug his heels into the ground. That was all that kept him from toppling over or otherwise being thrown around. What felt like a current connected him and Techno. It spat sparks, electric and alive beneath Phil's fingers. He couldn't control it (and neither could Techno, judging by his partner's alarm), but it was undeniably of his creation.

*How?* he thought dumbly.

No answers came to mind. Techno was just as lost as Phil, and the Force deigned to give either of them any answers. In fact, it urged Phil on, pouring even more power into the “current” and making Phil's whole body shake. He couldn't maintain it, whatever *it* was.

Instinct again plucked at Phil's mind, dragging his fingers apart until they were splayed in painful formation. He gritted his teeth. How the fuck did he let go of this? What the fuck was even happening?!

And then, the current turned from a monster to a gentle stream. Phil gasped in relief and frantically released his hold on the power, and in the back of his mind, he felt Techno do the same.

The current raged into being with a golden glow. Phil had two seconds to think, *Oh, what the fuck?* before the current pulsed, thrummed, and exploded outward. Phil was tossed backward, and he frantically called upon the Force to land him on his feet. Its response was sluggish and weak, as if the current had somehow caused it to lag, and Phil crashed onto his back.

For a few seconds, all he could do was lay there, staring up at the ashy sky. In the back of his mind, Phil felt Techno groan. So his partner hadn't escaped the shockwave, either.

What had just happened? Phil spent more time than he liked to admit in the Archives, but he'd never come across anything that mentioned a Force ability like *that*.

“Hey.”

Phil blinked and found Techno standing above him, holding out a hand. The pig Jedi's braid had come undone in places, and dust and dirt streaked his face. But a slight smile pulled at his mouth.

“Get up, old man,” Techno said, a hint of amusement touching his voice. “We aren't done yet.”

“You're only a few fucking years younger than me,” Phil griped in return. But he grabbed Techno's hand and hauled himself to his feet. Techno's grip tightened protectively for just a beat before he released Phil's hand. “Alright, where's the-”

Phil froze. A trench was scored into the ground. It ran from where he'd stood to a point across the field, and to either side of it, mercenaries and droids alike were collapsed in heaps. The mercenaries were still alive, but their dim Force presences proved they were passed out.

“What the fuck?” Phil muttered.

Techno glanced at him, and concern touched his partner's gaze. *I don't know.*

They stood there for a moment, both staring blankly at what *they* had caused. Phil's mind felt fuzzy, but the echoes of that current and the power had it held were as sharp as a knife.

Something boomed nearby, and Phil snapped from his thoughts. He whipped around wildly, and after a few revolutions, he spotted the source – the three remaining AT-TEs had made it out of the crater surrounding the Temple Gates.

“Shit,” Phil hissed, drawing his lightsaber once more. “Techno, we've got company.”

“Yeah, from both sides. Reinforcements are heading our way.”

“What?” Panic raced through Phil's nerves, and silently, he prayed that none of his close friends had come to fight. They needed to survive, not be heroes. “Who?”

Techno's face twisted in a grimace, and suddenly, Phil wondered if his friends were the better option. “It's the Council,” Techno announced, waving vaguely at the far end of the Gardens. “Cho-Nal's leading the pack. There's Jahra, Mazenos, Ippu... I almost wish Delphina was here. Eret said she knew how to fight.”

Phil laughed, but it was weak, even to his ears.

The Council weren't fighters. They never had been. They'd been elected to keep the Order running smoothly, to deal with internal issues and be master strategists. Phil had once told Techno that the day he saw Cho-Nal activate his lightsaber was the day the Temple was doomed.

How bitter irony was.

“Alright, we can't worry about them,” Phil decided, and he turned his back on the approaching Council. With the Gardens destroyed, the AT-TEs had a clear shot to the rest of the Temple. Only three were left. That was manageable. “Let's take these bastards down, then we'll see if Aries decides to show his fucking face.”

Techno nodded once, and together, they leaped into action.

Phil flipped his earpiece's frequency to Eret's as he charged at the nearest AT-TE. “Eret, where are you?” he called, ducking under a droid's wild swing and slicing through its chest.

“*On my way. Rhodys is with me.*”

“Good. The Council's coming, too.”

“*...in Tibulta's fucking name.*”

That startled a genuine chuckle out of Phil, and his mirth persisted as he and Techno tackled one of the AT-TEs. Their tactics were simple, fitting for a behemoth like Aries's AT-TEs. The mob boss had made some adjustments to improve speed and power, but the models were no less vulnerable. As soon as someone got close, the mechanical beasts were all but helpless.

Techno launched on top of the enforcer and disappeared from view; Phil stayed low. He swept his lightsaber through one of the AT-TE's legs, dodged the superheated metal plate, and dashed to the next one. While he disassembled the AT-TE's structure, Techno would be taking out its gunner and destroying its processor.

A few minutes later, Phil scrambled away from the staggering AT-TE just as it toppled to the ground. Techno jumped from its head and landed expertly next to him.

“Show-off,” Phil muttered, brushing imaginary dust from his robes.

The corners of Techno's mouth quirked in a smile.

“Philza!”

That was Eret, jogging away from the carcass of another downed AT-TE. Rhodys trailed him by a few steps.

“Where's the last one?” Eret asked once he stopped next to Techno.

Phil glanced around. Nowhere to be found. “I don't know,” he muttered, and fear spiked in his heart. Had one of the massive enforcers somehow fucking snuck past him? That was impossible. But if that wasn't the case, where had it-

An explosion suddenly rumbled the ground, and a pillar of fire erupted beyond the lip of the crater. Phil's heart shot into his throat.

When the first AT-TEs had brought down the Temple Gates, the impact had created a small ditch. Each following AT-TE had landed a few more blasts into the dirt, and eventually, a semi-deep crater had formed at the Temple's entrance. It was the perfect defensive position. Seeing it had made Phil realize just how sharp Aries was.

Regardless of its origins, an explosion meant that everyone in the crater had been incinerated. Whatever Jedi had been in there, the bodies of the fallen, and-

“Phil!”

Techno's shout dragged Phil back to the present. The pig Jedi stood at the crater's edge, and Phil hurried to his partner's side.

The explosion *hadn't* destroyed everything. In fact, the only thing on fire was a mangled AT-TE, which was surrounded by five triumphant Jedi. Their lightsabers glowed brightly in the ash and soot, and with the apocalyptic backdrop, they looked like the heroes of ancient legends.

“Who would have fucking guessed?” Phil muttered aloud.

Techno snorted, and something like bitterness touched their bond. “I guess it just takes a cataclysmic event to drag them out. We should've invited Aries here sooner.”

Maybe it was the exhaustion tugging at the edges of Phil's mind, making every thought seem stretched and warped. Maybe it was the staggering pressure of the situation or the stress of knowing that, if he failed, the Temple was doomed. Maybe it was even Techno, whose emotions flowed like water over their bond.

Whatever the final straw was, it broke the last of Phil's self-control. He snarled, then stalked away from the crater, turning his back on the Council for the second time. They'd taken their fucking



time. Half the Order was already dead – hell, maybe more! Antfrost was gods knew where, Aries and the Night Thief were suspiciously absent, and the Temple was still overrun.

And Phil wouldn't be all that upset if his fellow Councilmen got caught in the crossfire. Maybe then, they'd understand the sacrifices that their *subjects* made. Maybe then, they'd understand that adding fancy titles to their names wasn't enough to make them untouchable.

*“Philza! Technoblade! I've got a sighting on Aries and the Night Thief!”*

In that moment, Rhodys's voice sounded like an angel's call.

“Where?” Phil snapped, pressing his fingers to his earpiece.

*“Eastern walls! They set up some sort of camp, and they're talking to their men!”*

Phil glanced at Techno. His partner looked back at him.

They took off in unison.

As they tore through the Gardens, more droids and mercenaries appeared from the rubble. Phil and Techno spun, stabbed, and dashed, carving through Aries's forces. All the while, explosions rumbled the Temple. Every so often, Phil glanced at the main buildings. Too many had chunks blown from their sides. Too many had collapsed entirely.

The Temple was slowly dying.

Eventually, Eret's and Rhodys's Force presences appeared in Phil's mind. He grabbed Techno's arm, dragging his partner towards the other Jedi Masters. Eret and Rhodys were crouched behind a particularly haphazard pile, and Phil and Techno quickly sank next to them.

“Down there,” Rhodys whispered. Their eyes were bloodshot, mostly likely from the strain of using the Force. Phil decided against mentioning it. “Right next to the holotable.”

Phil nodded once, then carefully peered over the edge of their hiding place.

A hole had been blown in the wall, its creation probably disguised by the other explosions. At least 50 troops stood around, scanning the terrain with guns drawn. And, in the center of it all, Aries and the Night Thief stood side by side, talking to two mercenaries.

Hot rage burned through Phil's chest. Up until that point, he'd only seen Aries in security footage. In person, the man made his blood boil. There was a confident tilt to Aries's shoulders, and his arms were crossed loosely over his chest, pitch-black eyes scanning the mercenary he spoke to. His collared shirt was tucked underneath a fitted breastplate, and twin blasters sat in holsters on his hips.

The Night Thief was no less infuriating. Pictures failed to do the man's smug grin justice. He was significantly shorter than Aries, but his stance was no less jaunty. He, like Aries, wore a fitted breastplate and a blaster on his hips, but Phil picked out hidden sheaths dotting the thief's casual outfit. For fuck's sake, the Night Thief was wearing an oversized sweater to a siege.

The worst part wasn't how they looked or even the fact that their Force presences were nonexistent. It was their expressions. Both Aries and the Night Thief were perfectly relaxed. They knew they were winning, and if Aries's reputation was anything to go by, they'd started the siege with the belief that they would win.

Phil couldn't help but wonder if they'd be as confident if he removed a few limbs.

Rough fingers brushed against Phil's elbow, and the touch was just enough to chase the darkness from his mind. Phil exhaled deeply, sent a silent apology to Techno (who accepted with a hint of bemusement), then stabilized himself. He could fantasize about revenge later. Right now, he had to focus.

Aside from the people, a transportable holotable had been erected behind Aries and the Night Thief, and two vehicles were tucked next to the hole in the wall: a speeder bike and a small starship.

Phil frowned. *Two vehicles*, he reported to Techno, and he felt his partner stiffen. *Do you remember anything in Aries's files about close allies?*

*No. He's only friendly with the other mob bosses because of mutual benefit. They all want to keep their empires running, so they don't fight. Do you think he's gonna call for help?*

*I don't know.*

Aries clapped his hands, and Phil fixed all his attention on the mob boss. Phil was too far away to hear anything, but he could see Aries's face – smug and pleased. Things were going according to his plan.

The rage in Phil's chest sparked again, hot and thick.

The Night Thief suddenly let out a peal of bright laughter. He drew two knives from his belt, twirled them expertly between his fingers, then turned towards the hole in the wall. Before he could walk away, Aries caught the shorter man around the waist and pulled him in for a kiss. The Night Thief melted into the touch, his shoulders visibly loosening.

*I guess we were right about them being together*, Phil thought, slightly amused. He was about to send the thought to Techno when the Night Thief broke away and started towards the starship. Phil's mirth died. *Where's he going? I thought that ship was for their escape.*

Aries gave his men one last order, then hopped onto the speeder bike. He and the Night Thief left in unison – the starship taking off into the sky and the speeder bike racing across the Temple grounds.

“They split up,” Phil reported, dropping back behind the pile of rubble. Eret and Rhodys both stared at him, but understanding shone in Techno's eyes. Phil shot his partner a hesitant look. “You or me?”

Techno chewed his lip, and Phil almost smiled at the mannerism. He hadn't seen the taller man do that in years.

“I'll go,” Techno decided eventually.

“Wait, what are you talking about?” Eret interjected.

Phil ignored the question. “You sure?” he asked quietly. The unease running rampant through their bond was proof enough that Techno was not “sure,” but Phil wasn't willing to commit unless he heard his partner *say* it.

Techno laughed – a bitter, dry bark. “It's not like anyone else will do it. Besides, I'll be fine up there. I'm more worried about *you*.”

And therein lied the rub. The risk landed solidly on the shoulders of whoever stayed behind, but they didn't have time to debate or prepare.

"I'll be okay," Phil murmured. Techno didn't lose his frown, and Phil sighed, leaning forward to rest his real hand on Techno's neck and press his forehead against his partner's. He felt Techno's trembling exhale brush against his cheeks. "Stay safe. I'll deal with things down here. It'll only be a couple of hours, yeah?"

"Yeah."

Neither of them believed it. Good things never came from splitting up, and with so many variables at play, anything could happen. But split up they had to.

"Don't- don't die. Please."

Techno's voice was low, shaky. For just a second, the pig Jedi's shields dropped, and Phil closed his eyes as fear, anger, and the ache of melancholy flooded their bond.

*This isn't goodbye, he thought weakly. I promise.*

Silence. Then:

*Okay.*

Techno straightened, and Phil let his partner go. The taller man got to his feet, and he started off towards the Temple Gates with his shoulders pulled back. Even after everything, he was still determined to save as many lives as he could. Phil swallowed the ball of emotion that had suddenly lodged itself in his throat. How could anyone have ever accused Techno of having a corrupt heart?

*"Technoblade!"*

Phil's first thought was of complete and utter shock. Was this fate answering his question? Or just a cruel coincidence?

His second thought was of anger, and Phil turned to find Cho-Nal striding up to them. The other Jedi Master's Force presence smoldered with power. Vaguely, Phil felt Eret and Rhodys both staring at him. But he couldn't explain what was happening, not now.

"Stop!" the Councilman ordered. Several paces away, Techno complied. But his body was rigid, and Phil felt his partner's fury as if it were his own. Maybe it belonged to both of them. "Where the hell do you think you're going?" Cho-Nal continued, his voice laced with venom.

"The hangar," Techno said tightly. "I'm going after the Night Thief. Didn't you see him go?"

"I did. I don't see why that means you think *you* can leave."

There was something unstable in Cho-Nal's eyes, and Phil quickly strode forward, trying to deescalate the situation. "Cho-Nal, I know you don't like this," he began, frantically wracking his brain for a convincing argument. They didn't have time for this!

But Cho-Nal brushed past Phil without a second glance. "Technoblade, answer me! What gives you the right to abandon this Temple in its hour of need?"

A chill engulfed Phil's stomach. For a moment, everything was still.

Then unfiltered rage filled their bond. There were only a handful of moments in his life when Phil

had felt Techno's wrath, and usually, he tried to quell the storm. But this time, he didn't try to dissuade his partner in the slightest. Phil just set his jaw and stepped back.

Techno spun around, and his Force presence raged with ferocious power. "Don't talk to me about abandoning the Temple, Cho-Nal!" he bellowed. "I'm trying to save it! If the Night Thief gets reinforcements, we're all dead! The only one I'm abandoning is Phil, and in *your* hands, he could get *killed!*"

Cho-Nal's lips pulled back in a snarl. "You think only of him! I should have cut you two apart years ago and kept this *bond* from growing. Your loyalty never was and never should be to him, Technoblade. It's to the Order. It's to-

"I am loyal to my friends!" Techno roared. "I am loyal to *Phil!* You can't change that!"

Power sparked in Phil's chest, potent and bright. It cascaded through his mind, swept along by Techno's fury and encouraged by his body's automatic acceptance. Phil blinked, and before he even had time to register what was happening, the world changed. The Force drifted around him like streaks of light. Lines of silver and yellow encircled Eret and Rhodys, then darted off into the distance. Orange marked Cho-Nal's progress from the Temple.

And Techno? Blood red and emerald green wove around him, and even his trail was mottled.

Phil quickly glanced down at himself. Unsurprisingly, his Force presence was the same blend of red and green. He and Techno were inseparably intertwined; that much he'd known since receiving his prosthetic. But Phil was startled by the line of power connecting him and Techno, swirling the same red and green as their Force presences.

Was it a tangible representation of their bond? Or something else entirely?

The lines of power collapsed in a flash, and Phil let out an involuntary gasp. Across the field, Techno visibly relaxed.

Cho-Nal glanced between them. Suspicion and something strangely like jealousy wrestled on his face until, eventually, he settled on anger. "What disgraces," Cho-Nal hissed. "You are not fit to call yourself a Jedi, Philza. And you, Technoblade? You are a danger to all of us. You should have never been accepted into this Temple."

*The fuck do you know about being a Jedi, huh?!* is what Phil dearly wanted to shout. He even inhaled to say as much, because if Cho-Nal thought he could say shit like that and get away with it, he was fatally mistaken.

But something in Techno's passive expression made Phil pause.

For a moment, the pig Jedi was still. Then his eyes flicked to Phil, and the warmest smile Phil had ever seen Techno wear spread across the taller man's face.

"You're right," Techno murmured. "I'm not a Jedi. I'm only here because the best man I've ever known fought to keep me around."

With that, Techno shrugged his outer robes from his shoulders and let them fall to the ground. Underneath, a silver plate protected his right shoulder, and several pieces of interlacing armor covered his stomach and chest. Even his standard-issue soft-sole boots had been exchanged for steel-tipped monstrosities.

Techno glanced at Phil again, and this time, Phil understood. *Are you sure?* he asked softly. He

couldn't explain his apprehension, but it existed all the same.

That same warm smile touched Techno's face and made Phil's heart swell. *Yeah. This was a long time coming. I'll be back for you.*

*I know.*

Techno turned and continued across the Gardens, his head held high.

“If you walk away now, Technoblade,” Cho-Nal began, his voice harsh, “you can never come back. You are forfeiting the right to call yourself a Jedi.”

Even from so far away, Phil heard his partner's chuckle as clearly as if Techno stood right next to him. The sound brought a smile to his face.

“What a tragedy,” the pig Jedi called.

Then Techno dropped over the edge of the crater and disappeared.

For a moment, the world stood still. Even the fires paused in their rampage to observe the unfolding drama. Phil took one breath, two. The fight hadn't yet been won. He might still die amongst the imploding Temple, and there was a chance Techno couldn't stop the Night Thief from bringing back reinforcements. But their bond thrummed with triumph, and Phil couldn't hide his proud grin. Techno was finally free.

Cho-Nal suddenly scoffed and turned away from the Temple Gates, striding towards Phil, Eret, and Rhodys. “Good riddance,” he muttered. He eyed Eret and Rhodys, then shifted his gaze to Phil. “It seems as if you no longer have a partner, Philza.”

Phil examined Cho-Nal for a long, long moment. He'd thought that things were changing. That Cho-Nal finally realized that the Council had irreversibly damaged its people, that exiling George had put the Jedi Order on the path to civil war. The only reason it hadn't reached that point was Aries's meddling. And even then, the Underworld's involvement had been wrought by a broken Jedi.

But Cho-Nal hadn't changed. His ego had led him to exile George, and his pride had just driven away one of the Order's strongest members.

Well, to be exact – *two* of its strongest members.

“No, I go where Techno goes,” Phil said mildly. Cho-Nal's eyes narrowed into slits, but Phil just shrugged his robes from his shoulders. Underneath, he wore his Underworld armor – just like Techno. “Hate to break it to you, but he's still my partner. Sorry.”

Cho-Nal stared. He didn't say anything, yet the maelstrom of emotions in his eyes spoke volumes.

Phil didn't wait for the other Jedi Master to get himself together.

“Unless we clear out the Temple, we won't be able to survive a second wave,” he said, turning to face Eret and Rhodys. Both of his peers snapped to attention, and Eret's lips even twitched in a grin. “I say we split up and help wherever we can. Techno will keep me updated, and I'll pass the information on to you two.”

Eret and Rhodys glanced at each other.

“Sounds good to me,” Eret announced eventually, far more cheerfully than the situation should have allowed. “Rhodys?”

The Trandoshan only smiled, and together, they and Eret hopped to their feet and launched over the pile of rubble. The ambushed mercenaries instantly began wailing.

Phil was just about to join the fight when a heavy hand landed on his shoulder.

“You know what you've done, don't you?” Cho-Nal asked. For the first time in his entire life, Phil recognized the hint of danger in Cho-Nal's voice. “I won't let you come back, Philza.”

Phil brushed Cho-Nal's hand off of his shoulder. “I know,” he said lightly. The glare he shot the senior Councilman was anything but light. Phil even allowed some of his Underworld intimidation to shine through, and he was gratified by Cho-Nal's startled flinch. “And I don't give a shit. Now back the fuck up so I can get to work. Go find somewhere to hide in until this is all over. I promise that you'll be the last to know.”

Phil threw himself into the fight before Cho-Nal could respond. He didn't have time to wait for the older man to form a witty retort, and really, he didn't give a fuck anymore.

As soon as Aries was out of the Temple, Phil and Techno were no longer Jedi.

And Phil had never felt so free in his life.

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*“Fuck!”*

Clay whipped around at Nick's panicked scream, and his stomach bottomed out as the younger man tumbled through the front door with his robes on fire. Clay raced across the room and frantically patted the flames until they faded to ash.

“Are you okay?” he demanded, grabbing Nick's shoulder.

Nick latched onto Clay's wrist, and his friend's weak grip made Clay's heart stutter. “Fine,” Nick hacked, his words broken up by wet coughs. “I thought I could make it out. But I guess the world hates me today.”

“It hates us every day,” Clay mumbled, slipping his arms under Nick's shoulders and hauling the younger man to his feet. He was gratified by Nick's quiet, if pained, laugh. “Anything?” Clay shouted at the other side of his room.

For a horrible, silent moment, there was no response. Then George and Tubbo burst from Clay's bedroom, both coughing loudly.

“Nothing!” George called. “All your windows are blocked by debris!”

“Shit, shit shit,” Clay muttered, and he couldn't suppress a tinge of panic as he lowered Nick to the couch. Tubbo's fear instantly went up a few ticks, and Clay swore mentally, beating himself over the head before shoving all his emotions into a tiny box. He had to be strong, or Tubbo would fall apart.

But their situation was bleak. Even calling it bleak was generous – things were dismal.

First had come the sirens. They'd been watching tv when the first eerie wail had spread across the

Temple, and Tubbo's eyes had gone wide with terror. Clay had gently gripped his padawan's shoulders and tried to coax him back to awareness.

Then had come the shooting.

Clay hadn't even realized someone was firing on the Temple until a deafening rumble had overpowered the sirens, followed by rubble crashing into the building. Fires had erupted, parts of his room had crumbled, and the Force had begun to scream.

The following half an hour had been spent examining every corner of Clay's room. Every door, window, and vent was blocked. Nothing granted them escape.

All except for the windows facing south. Those had remained miraculously untouched, but Clay knew better to escape that way. He'd heard footsteps on the roof right after the first impact, and if they tried to sneak out, they would be riddled with laser bolts.

But they had to do *something*. The fires in the hallway were creeping closer and closer, and Clay had a horrible gut instinct that the building wouldn't hold up much longer.

Hands suddenly landed on Clay's, breaking him from his thoughts. Clay flailed at the touch until he recognized the ice blue Force presence accompanying it.

"Breathe," George ordered quietly. Clay obediently took a breath, and the lines around George's eyes loosened. "There you go. You were choking me with your Force presence."

"Sorry," Clay rasped. He tried not to let his guilt seep across to Tubbo.

George squeezed Clay's hands again, gentle and soothing. "Are there any other ways out of this room? Can we break through the floor or a wall? Is there anything else that doesn't put us in danger?"

George sounded like he was talking to a startled animal, and part of Clay wanted to be offended at the comparison. But he shook off his ego and said, "We can try cutting through the floor. The next floor down is more Masters housing, so there shouldn't be any of Aries's men waiting for us."

"Okay." George took a deep breath, and his shoulders squared. "Okay. You'll have to do it since Nick is still coughing up a lung."

Again, Clay resented being told what to do. Again, he stuffed down his irritation and untangled his hands from George's, hurrying towards the center of the room. He spared just a moment to pat Tubbo's shoulder. His padawan's only response was a wisp of shaky acknowledgment through their bond.

From what Clay could remember, all of the Masters' buildings had the same floor plan. If he cut a hole in the middle of his floor, it should put him directly in the room below.

Provided his room wasn't different. And, of course, assuming that the floor below hadn't collapsed.

Fuck. So many things that could go wrong.

But Clay didn't have time for anything except action.

He gritted his teeth and drew his lightsaber from his belt, activating it with a flick. The green blade put his nerves at ease, and Clay drove it into the floor with slightly steadier hands. Each building in the Temple had layers of reinforced steel between the walls and floors (to prevent collapses), so it

was slow going. Clay had to dig his heels into the carpet just to get his lightsaber to budge.

*There has to be a better way*, Clay thought darkly, casting his gaze around. *The building is going to fall apart before I can cut through.*

Fall apart the building might, but Clay didn't have any other choices. If he did, he would have taken them before attempting to cut through *reinforced fucking steel*.

Clay tamped down the wave of emotions crashing around his head, tucking them away for later. Tubbo was undoubtedly getting pieces of his unrest, but it was better than letting his padawan suffer along with him. Admittedly, Clay knew that Tubbo was probably more experienced at handling emotions than he. But that only fueled his determination.

This wasn't supposed to happen. Tubbo was supposed to get time to *heal*. The boy had been through so much; he hadn't even been able to go a single afternoon without falling apart. Aries should have stayed away, and Tubbo should have been able to rest.

Why couldn't Tubbo rest? Why did he have to constantly shoulder everything? Why couldn't Clay had just gotten *through* to Tubbo?

As lost in his thoughts as he was, Clay unconsciously tuned out the Force raging around him. But then, something caught his attention. It was enough for some instinct to make Clay hesitate.

Nick still sat on the couch, coughing into his sleeve, and George stood next to him with a hand on his shoulder. Tubbo hovered behind George, but the brown-haired boy's gaze was fixed on one of the windows, his eyes wide. But there was nothing outside the-

No. Something had changed. A blank space was hurtling towards the building, and the mercenaries crowding around the windows had gone on full alert.

“Geroge-” Clay started to shout.

Then the sound of a lightsaber carving through flesh pierced the air, followed by several screams and a few distant thuds.

Clay froze. He glanced at his companions and found them frozen as well – except Tubbo's face was creased with concern. Their bond was flooded with fear, and his chest heaved in erratic bursts.

*It's okay, Tubbo*, Clay thought, sending all the peace he still possessed through their bond. He prayed he didn't sound as frantic as he felt. *Maybe it's a-*

*No. He's back.*

Clay just had time to think, *He?* before the window shattered and a figure came tumbling into the room, bringing a wave of heat and smoke with them. Clay instantly reeled back, dragging his lightsaber from the half-finished cut and raising it defensively. He couldn't see through the rush of smoke, but the figure was familiar.

The figure's shields dropped. Clay's heart stopped.

Antfrost.

The smoke chose that moment to whoosh out the window, leaving the cat Jedi unobstructed. He crouched on the floor, his robes a tattered mess and his fur matted with soot. Antfrost's aura pulsed a muted silver, and Clay realized with a start that it was the first time he'd felt his old friend's Force



presence in *years*.

How long had Antfrost been collaborating with Aries? How long had he planned to use Tubbo?

Clay's anger exploded into a raging bonfire.

"Antfrost," he snarled, lowering into an offensive stance. "How dare you fucking show up here? I don't care what techniques you fucking know; I will-"

Something clattered to the ground. Clay blinked, startled from his bloodlust. After a moment, he realized that Antfrost had tossed his lightsaber towards the couch. Tubbo quickly snatched it up, though his eyes remained fixed on Antfrost.

As for the cat Jedi himself... Antfrost's head was down, and his arms swayed slightly at his sides. As if prompted by Clay's bewilderment, the other man shuffled towards Clay, then collapsed to his knees. His neck was completely exposed.

"Just kill me," Antfrost croaked.

*What?*

Clay's hands wavered, the tip of his lightsaber dipping. He instantly felt someone shoot him a panicked look (probably George, given the shorter man's Underworld habits), but Clay couldn't find it in himself to raise his blade. Antfrost looked utterly defeated. The cat Jedi might have been some sort of secret Force Master, but as close as they were, Antfrost couldn't hide his Force presence.

The other man expected to die.

"Kill you?" Clay repeated hoarsely. Antfrost didn't even look up, and Clay stumbled back a step. Everything about this situation was wrong. "What the fuck do you think I am?" he demanded. "I'm not a traitor to the Order! I'm not like you!"

Anger shouldn't be his default. But staring down at Antfrost, looking so miserable and *broken*, all Clay could feel was rage. Antfrost had been the one inflicting pain! How dare he pretend to-

A sniffle broke the silence. With a horrible start, Clay realizing Antfrost was crying.

"You're nothing like me," Antfrost agreed quietly, tears breaking up his words. "You're stronger. You've always been stronger because you moved on and-" A sob interrupted Antfrost's words, and the cat Jedi hunched over, pressing his face into his hands.

*I didn't move on*, Clay thought dumbly. It was the wrong thing to focus on; this he knew, but those four words had been seared into his brain. "*Because you moved on.*"

He hadn't. He'd never even gotten close. He'd thrown himself at every distraction that had come his way, and gods, how long had it been since Clay had even talked to Antfrost? The last conversation he remembered having with his childhood friend was two years ago, just before he'd taken Tubbo on as a padawan. It had only been a few minutes, a passing conversation in a hallway.

Holy fuck. Clay had abandoned Antfrost without even realizing it. What- what had he done? Had *he* inadvertently caused Antfrost to turn on the Temple?

Antfrost suddenly took a shuddering breath, and he finally looked up. Clay flinched at the blatant desperation shining in the cat Jedi's icy eyes.

“I know I can't fix things anymore,” Antfrost choked out. “I should have stopped all of this months ago. But I can't, and I- I can't let you die. I can't let *any* of you die. I'm going to try to find Bad next, just- please, just *run*. You'll die if you stay here.”

The end of Antfrost's speech trailed into a breathless whine, and the cat Jedi collapsed in on himself, burying his face in the carpet with silent sobs. His shoulders heaved, and his tail twined through his own legs.

His neck was still exposed.

Clay couldn't think. His brain was racing at double-speed, bouncing backward, then forward, then catapulting him all the way back into the past. In reality, Clay had no idea what Antfrost's motives were. He'd never had a chance to find out. Clay only knew that Tubbo had been blackmailed because his padawan had opened up after a particularly rough night. But Antfrost? Antfrost was a mystery.

The Force rippled, and Clay glanced at his friends. They looked as conflicted as he felt; George and Nick both stared at their old friend with a mixture of confusion and sadness, and Tubbo clutched Antfrost's lightsaber to his chest. But Tubbo didn't look scared. Instead, tears dripped down his cheeks.

*What's wrong?* Clay asked softly. It was a stupid question, but he couldn't help but ask it.

*He's hurting*, Tubbo responded. *He's been hurting for a long time.*

*How do you know that?*

*His Force presence is ragged around the edges. It happens when you cut yourself off from the Force for a long time.*

Clay started to ask how the hell Tubbo knew that, too. Then he remembered a moment from a few nights' previous, when he'd noticed a particularly tattered section of Tubbo's Force presence. He'd silently resolved to ask Bad about that.

Now he knew.

Hesitantly, Clay turned off his lightsaber and lowered himself towards Antfrost. George and Nick both instantly flared with alarm, but Clay ignored both of them, carefully laying a hand on Antfrost's back. The cat Jedi flinched as if struck. Clay hated the all-too-familiar mannerism.

“What are you doing here, Antfrost?” he asked quietly.

A beat. Two. Then:

“I had to warn you. Even if you killed me, I had to help you get out of here. I caused this mess, so I had to do *something*.”

Again, the insinuation that Antfrost expected to die made Clay's stomach churn. “Why the hell did you think we were going to kill you?” he muttered, pressing the nails of his free hand into his palm.

What Clay expected was another mumbled answer. Instead, Antfrost slowly picked himself up, straightening until he looked Clay dead in the eyes. His gaze was weary, just as ragged as his Force presence.

“Because you've killed others for less,” Antfrost said tiredly.

Clay's heart froze in his chest.

How did Antfrost know that? How the *fuck* did he know that?

"I saw you, you know," the cat Jedi continued miserably, rubbing his eyes with the back of his hand. "Every day, you'd come and go. You only stayed put once you were assigned to Tubbo, but before that... there were so many days that I thought you'd died."

Clay's head was reeling, spinning, and gods, he couldn't see straight anymore. He'd suppressed those memories in the deepest, darkest corners of his mind. But they were slowly coming back to life, prompted by Antfrost's words, and- and-

Nightmare hadn't come from nowhere, after all. Nightmare had been crafted by every piece of hatred Clay had no other way to expel. Nightmare's reputation had been built off of the jobs Clay had taken, his relentless search for George lending weight to the bloody rumors. Some of them had been exaggerated. Others were true.

No. No, this wasn't the time to deal with that. Clay had been doing so well at keeping all his unruly feelings under wraps, and this was the *wrong fucking time to bring even darker demons back to life*.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Clay rasped. His voice was weak, unsteady, even to his own ears.

Antfrost seemed to crumple even further, and Clay instantly knew that he'd said the wrong thing. "I should have known I was wrong," the cat Jedi mumbled. "I shouldn't have assumed. You all did so much *better*." A fresh wave of desperation filled Antfrost's eyes, and he suddenly lunged forward, latching onto Clay's shoulders. "Please, *run*. Schlatt has- *I* have already killed so many Jedi, and the Order can't survive this. You're going to die if you don't get out of here."

Up close, Clay could see the scars crisscrossing Antfrost's face. He could see the perpetual exhaustion lined in his old friend's face, noticed the way that Antfrost used "Schlatt," not Aries. Just like Tommy. Just like Tubbo.

"What about you?"

The question nearly made Clay jump out of his skin, and he frantically glanced over. Tubbo had advanced beyond the couch. Antfrost's lightsaber dangled loosely in his hand.

"Quackity should be here by now," Tubbo continued dully, and Clay hated how easily the Night Thief's real name fell from the boy's lips. "If you stay here, you're going to die, too."

Antfrost shot Tubbo a look somewhere between exhausted and knowing. "I'm meant to die. *You* deserve a second chance."

It was all so familiar. Clay had heard those same words from Tubbo, over and over and over. Though their bond, during dreams, in the darkest moments when Tubbo sobbed that he'd considered throwing himself into the factory's lake of lava just to escape. Clay had been thinking about it all wrong, hadn't he? Antfrost wasn't another Delphina. He was another Tubbo.

"And why the fuck should we trust you?"

Again, Clay was jolted from his thoughts. George had also moved from Nick's side and now stood protectively in front of Tubbo.

“You started all of this,” the engineer accused, his voice harsh. “For all we fucking know, this is Aries's next move. You lure us out, then we're sniped from all sides. We have no reason to trust you.”

The room was silent for a long, long moment. Then Antfrost let out a broken, little laugh.

“It was all for you, George.”

George's shoulders tensed. He stared at Antfrost as if the other man had grown another head, but suddenly, Clay understood. He recognized the desperation all too well.

Antfrost relinquished Clay's shoulders and turned to face George fully. “You didn't see what happened when you left,” he said weakly. “Everything fell apart. *Everyone* fell apart. The Council caused all of it, and they never owned up to a thing. And I thought-” Antfrost cut himself off with another shaky laugh. “It doesn't matter. I was wrong. I won't make it out of here today, but I have to try. I have to find Bad.”

With that, Antfrost stood. He headed back towards the window he'd crashed through, his Force presence already fading out of existence. Just before he jumped through the hole, he glanced back at Tubbo.

A silent moment passed between the two. Eventually, Tubbo held out the lightsaber, and Antfrost summoned it to his hand with the faintest nod. Then he was gone.

Smoke still trailed through the window, and laser fire mixed with the still-wailing sirens. But, inside the room, everything seemed completely silent.

It was all too much. Clay's brain couldn't process everything that had just happened, not with the Force pressing at the edges of his mind, and Tubbo's emotions rippling through their bond, and George and Nick both shedding emotions freely-

Clay slammed his palms into his temples, and to his relief, the pain focused him. He could deal with *everything* later. At the moment, he only had one choice to make.

Did he trust Antfrost and try to escape the Temple, or did he stay and protect the Order?

Clay clambered to his feet and shuffled over to his friends. George, completely shell-shocked, Tubbo, with his eyes blank and unfocused. Nick was the only one who still looked aware, and he shot Clay a disgruntled look as he approached.

“We can't abandon the Order,” the shorter man muttered. “I don't know what the fuck is going on with Antfrost, but he's clearly out of his mind. There's no way Aries can beat. We just have to get out of here.”

Deep in his heart, Clay agreed. They couldn't leave *now*.

Then Tubbo sniffled. “You can't beat Schlatt,” he croaked, and tears welled up in his eyes once again. Clay immediately reached out, but Tubbo held up his hands defensively. “No, no, *listen* to me. Schlatt knows this Temple inside and outside. Antfrost and I both drew up floor plans. Quackity has gotten in and out of here so many times, and gods know what he's done when I wasn't paying attention. Antfrost was right. The Temple isn't going to exist after today.”

Tubbo took a deep breath, but it only seemed to fracture what little strength he'd been clinging onto. The boy's shoulders began to shake.

“Please,” Tubbo whispered. “If Schlatt or Quackity find me, they're going to kill me. We- we have to leave.”

In that moment, Clay made his choice.

“Okay,” he said, and Tubbo's gaze snapped up to meet his. Clay felt Nick's and George's gazes boring holes into the side of his head, but he ignored them both. “We'll follow Antfrost out the window and take our chances.”

“Clay!” Nick protested. The shorter man lifted himself off the couch, though he was still clearly unsteady. “We can't leave! This is-”

Clay glanced pointedly at Tubbo, then shifted his gaze back to Nick. Slowly, the fight drained from the shorter man's face. Clay could almost see Nick's thought process, the way his friend shuffled through the pros and cons, eventually coming to the same conclusion Clay had.

Tubbo had suffered enough. He was their priority.

“You're sure?” George asked suddenly, breaking the uneasy silence. “There's no coming back from running. If we leave right now, you and Nick cannot come back until Aries has had his fun. There is no saving people; there is no being a hero.”

Guilt crept across Clay's bond with Tubbo. The boy thought he wasn't worth it.

“I'm sure,” Clay murmured. “We're getting the fuck out of here.”

Something like approval mixed with surprise flashed across George's face. Then it disappeared under the cold mask that Clay associated with “Underworld George” – rather, the persona he associated with 404.

“Alright,” George said briskly, and he strode over to the window. “Looks like the coast is clear, so we'll go out one by one. There's a bit of a drop, but it shouldn't be a problem for you Force freaks. Nick, follow me, and Tubbo, go after him. Clay, watch our backs.”

Clay nodded once, and George dropped through the window.

Nick shot Clay a hesitant look. “Is he always like that when he's focused and shit?” he asked with the barest hint of a nervous smile.

Clay returned the expression. “Yeah. That's 404. Go.”

Nick hobbled to the window, then swung himself through the opening. He disappeared in a rush of soot-stained robes. Tubbo instantly followed the Knight, but he paused halfway through his descent, unshed tears gleaming in his eyes.

*Thank you,* he whispered.

*Anything to keep you safe,* Clay murmured back.

Tubbo dropped from sight.

Clay started forward, but something gave him pause. He glanced over his shoulder – once, briefly. His room was half-collapsed, and fire still raged in the doorway, but memories flitted around like ghostly butterflies. Clay had done a lot in this room. He'd taught his padawan, cried himself to sleep, and bandaged old wounds over and over and over. Today, he'd even hung out with his friends

once more.

He was leaving it all behind.

And Clay had a sinking feeling that he wouldn't be coming back to the Temple any time soon.

“Clay, come on!”

That was George, shouting up at him.

Clay took a deep breath. *Goodbye*, he told the Temple.

Then he swung himself through the window and dropped down to his friends.

## Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading! I hope you enjoyed it, and if you did, please leave a comment with your thoughts! (I will get to last chapter's comments tomorrow morning, when I'm slightly more coherent lol)

With any luck, come this time next week, *Inferno in the Sky* may finally reach its conclusion.

Until the next chapter, y'all! Take care of yourselves!

## Era, Part 4

### Chapter Notes

And here we are, folks - the last official chapter. After this release, there will be an epilogue, and then... the story is over. I'll spare you the sappy notes until the epilogue, but I dearly hope you like this final, onbrand *long* chapter as much as I did. Enjoy!

General CW for death and destruction.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Tommy's feet slipped on the slick bricks, and for one horrible second, he thought he was going to fall. Then his boots found purchase, and he was stumbling along once again. Wilbur had vanished in the smoke, but his fingers still wrapped around Tommy's wrist like a vice.

Even without the touch, it was impossible to lose the taller man. Wilbur's Force presence glowed brighter than Tommy had ever seen it before – a dazzling amber in the gray.

A spike of pain drove into the back of Tommy's head, and he let out an involuntary hiss. The sting was instantly whisked away.

*Just a little farther, Tommy.*

The thought was urgent and sharp, but beneath the confident front, Tommy saw the cracks. He felt the way Wilbur's legs burned with each step, the way his Master wavered under the strain of keeping both of their minds protected. Wilbur had taken the burden of Tommy's sensitivity, but he'd neglected to close off their bond.

He always forgot about their bond. Once upon a time, Tommy would have been affronted by the forgetfulness. Now, he just swallowed his worry and siphoned some of Wilbur's pain away.

Loops weren't meant to last. But it was enough to keep them *both* on their feet for a few more minutes.

They only had a few more minutes before everything went to hell, anyway.

Seeing the Temple from above had told Tommy just how fucked they were, but once Wilbur had carried him down from the Angel Wing and started across the grounds, Tommy had realized the full extent of the damage. The air was so choked with smoke that it looked like a different planet. Figures appeared and disappeared in the distance, and occasionally, the Force rippled from a powerful burst.

Tommy had done his utmost to ignore everything the Force screamed at him – all except for three presences. Amber, dragging him along, green, somewhere near the main gates, and red, also near the main gates.

Wilbur, Phil, Techno.

For a while, Tommy had included Tubbo in his mental sweeps. Then a horrible ball of anger, sadness, and *betrayal* had flared in his chest, and Tommy had immediately tossed the other boy's

presence from his mind.

It was petty, he knew. Anyone with a working brain could see that Tubbo had been through some shit, and he hadn't been acting of his own accord. Tommy knew that. He knew that; he'd heard it over and over, and everyone had told him to think about what Tubbo had experienced.

But every time Tommy started to consider forgiveness, a series of images flashed through his head.

Wilbur, plunging towards the lava.

Wilbur, sprawled at odd angles on grimy tiles, his legs ruined beyond repair.

Wilbur, slumped against the pillows of an Angel Wing bed.

Sensations came with the images, too. Tommy was scorched by heat, then assaulted by the smell of burning flesh, then subjected to the *agony* of sitting still for hours at a time, just waiting and praying that Wilbur would survive. It all came in an instant and disappeared in a flash.

Every time, it dashed his thoughts of forgiveness against the rocks of his mind.

Other people could forgive Tubbo. Other people could help Tubbo through *whatever* he'd been through, and once Tommy didn't feel like strangling the other boy every time he saw his stupid face, *then* they could make amends. That was what Philza had always told him, wasn't it? "Don't fight while you're angry."

Granted, the Jedi Master had probably been talking about a physical fight. But with everything that had happened over the past few months, Tommy would almost classify his grudge as physical.

Because Wilbur hobbled along on two pieces of curved metal, and the Temple was in shambles around them. Because laser fire crackled through the air, earthquakes constantly rumbled the Temple's foundations, and everywhere Tommy looked, rubble crashed to the ground.

Because Wilbur's hand was latched onto a durasteel wrist. Because Tommy couldn't write anymore, and he could barely hold a practice lightsaber without developing horrible cramps in his forearm. His nerve damage was so severe that the physical therapist had prescribed *wrist exercises*.

Yeah. Other people could forgive Tubbo first.

Wilbur dragged Tommy past a hulking pile of smoking metal, and fear touched Tommy's heart. There was a chance he wouldn't even survive the next half an hour.

Tommy's brave front cracked. Hysteria leaked into his mind, tinging his bitter thoughts with mind-numbing terror. Tommy frantically patched the crack with a determined, "*it'll be fine.*" It didn't really work. But it was enough to keep his legs moving and his heart pumping.

Two figures suddenly emerged from the smoke, and Wilbur froze. Tommy stumbled a stop next to his Master, then squinted at the approaching forms.

Shortish. One wielded a blaster, the other a spear.

Enemies.

Tommy called upon whatever Force power still remained in his body and hurled it towards the two mercenaries. His Force blast sent the two sprawling to the ground, and for a split second, Tommy felt their presences among the maelstrom. Both were faint, barely even visible.



At least he hadn't accidentally attacked another Jedi.

“Well done,” Wilbur gasped out. He took a deep breath (Tommy noted the strain in his Master's voice with no small amount of concern), then glanced over. “How the fuck did you do that? I can't even *touch* the Force right now.”

In truth, Tommy was astounded that the Force had responded to his call. If he extended his mind to it, the only feedback he received was echoes and wails, the raging battles stretching its power thin.

“I'm special,” he decided eventually.

The faintest hint of a grin touched Wilbur's face. “Can't fucking argue with that.”

And then Wilbur took off once again. Tommy let himself be pulled along, ducking under half-collapsed buildings and weaving through an impossible maze of smoke and boulders. All the while, Wilbur's words rattled around in his head like a loose pinball.

*“Please, Tommy, we have to leave. I can't- I can't let you die.”*

Wilbur had made a lot of promises in the time Tommy had been his padawan. Most of them, his Master had made good on. But never had Tommy heard such genuine desperation in Wilbur's voice. Never had he so surely believed that his Master would see something through.

So, despite the two further encounters they had with mercenaries (both of which were solved by a Force blast from Tommy), the continuously falling debris, and the explosions that rocked the earth, Tommy believed he would survive. Somehow, someday, Wilbur would get them both out of this fucking disaster.

And, by all the gods, Wilbur succeeded.

Tommy was exhausted by the time they made it across the Temple. His robes were sooty and shredded, and his prosthetic had a new scorch mark from where a laser bolt had skittered across it. The Force no longer responded to his calls, and Tommy and Wilbur had both run out of strength to maintain their emotional loops. They were stumbling along on their own tired legs.

Then they crested the last hill, and Tommy saw it.

There were two ways to get to the hangar nestled beneath the Temple. One was an elevator in the Central Wing. The other was a secondary elevator tucked into the far northeast corner of the Temple, hidden next to the Temple Gates. By some divine stroke of providence, the squat gray building was still standing.

Maybe Schlatt hadn't noticed it. Maybe he'd assumed it was a tool shed. Whatever the case, Tommy couldn't stop a giddy laugh from slipping out.

“That's it, Will,” he giggled. He lifted their joined hands and pointed at the building. “It's still there.”

For just a moment, relief loosened the lines of Wilbur's face, and Tommy even thought he saw tears well up in the taller man's eyes. Then it was gone, and Tommy was being tugged down the incline.

“Almost there, almost there,” Wilbur muttered. “*Come on.*”

Tommy didn't know if Wilbur was talking to him or the Force. He deigned not to ask.

They skidded down the ashy incline, dodging the small fires that still spluttered on dried bushes. The ruined Gates were half-buried to their left, and Tommy could make out the forms of two burning AT-TEs. Both looked wrecked beyond repair, and relief flooded Tommy's mind. At least they wouldn't have to worry about getting ambushed from behind.

As soon as they were close enough, Wilbur slammed his palm against the scanner. The door opened with a cheerful bing, and Tommy tumbled into the small elevator with a gasp, crashing against the far wall. Fresh air spilled into his lungs. Each breath cleared the haze from his brain, and gods, did it feel good. When Tommy finally blinked the last of the soot from his eyes, he found Wilbur watching him fondly.

“What?” he asked, stifling a cough. “What the fuck are you looking at me like that for?”

He didn't sound as tough as he wanted to. Wilbur's amused chuckle only confirmed his suspicions, but Tommy couldn't find it in himself to be all that upset.

“You look like shit,” Wilbur said, still clearly amused. “Your hair's all black. Looks like mine.”

Tommy instantly made a show of ruffling his hair, sending ash flakes fluttering around him. The sudden movement made Tommy's head pound, but Wilbur's bright laugh was worth it.

They'd really done it. They'd escaped a war zone.

*“I promised I would keep you safe, and that's what I'm going to do. We're going to make it out of this. You're going to see tomorrow's sunrise, I promise.”*

*I believe you*, Tommy thought. He glanced up at his Master once again, and something about the shine in Wilbur's eyes told him that the taller man knew what he meant. *I believe you*.

Wilbur's smile grew a little warmer.

A few seconds later, the elevator doors slid open. Compared to the hellish landscape above, the hangar was pristine. Some ships had been crushed by rubble, and small fires burned in puddles of fuel. But by and large, everything was intact.

That included Wilbur's personal ship, which dangled neatly in its clamps.

“Make sure we have fucking fuel!” Wilbur ordered, who was already hobbling off towards his ship. “We're fucking dead if we get stranded out there!”

“Yessir!” Tommy bellowed in response.

They still weren't out of the fire, but the familiar back-and-forth eased Tommy's edge. Wilbur's modified transport was all but a second home to him. It had shuttled them across the galaxies, and Tommy knew its design like the back of his hand.

Well, his real hand, anyway.

Tommy ducked underneath the freighter's right wing, flicking his gaze across the many panels blinking back at him. Everything was in order. He circled to the back, and again, everything was in place. They had plenty of fuel, and miraculously, nothing had been damaged.

*We're good!* Tommy shouted through their bond.

Wilbur responded with a flare of affirmation, so Tommy hurried out from under the freighter

(dubbed Limbo I by neat, blue lettering) and headed for the ramp. He skipped on board just as Wilbur started the ship.

The inside of Limbo I looked so... normal. Wilbur's workbench was tucked against the far wall, and their bunks were still neatly made. It had only been a few months since Tommy and Wilbur's last off-planet mission, yet it felt like an entire lifetime had passed. Tommy felt... safe. Safer than he had in the Temple for a good long while.

“Tommy, get the fuck up here!”

Tommy snapped to attention and turned, jogging over to the cockpit. Wilbur had already settled himself in the pilot's chair, so Tommy reluctantly sank into the co-pilot's chair.

“Are you sure you can fucking drive?” Tommy muttered as he began the start-up sequence, activating their lights, shields, and engine cylinders. Wilbur threw him a dirty look, and Tommy raised his hands defensively. “You have two fucking peg legs! *Excuse* me for not wanting to die as soon as we get out of this fucking hangar!”

“I'm *fine*,” Wilbur bit out. And, as if to prove his point, he revved the engine with the manual pedal.

Despite the sharp words being exchanged, they were free of venom. This was their typical banter, and Tommy's heart swelled with each switch that he flipped. They were so close. The nightmare of the Temple was almost behind them.

Finally, all the appropriate lights blinked back at them. Tommy sucked in a breathe, then pressed his thumb against Limbo I's electromagnetic charge.

The charge activated a mechanism in the massive hangar doors. The mechanism moved the doors, and once the doors were open, they were home free.

For one horrible moment, Tommy thought he'd jinxed it.

Then the doors rumbled apart on smooth rollers, and Tommy's heart punched through his chest.

“Hang on,” Wilbur said, a tad breathlessly. “We're getting the fuck out of here.”

Limbo I hummed beneath them, powerful and silent. Then the clamps disconnected, and the ship shot forward, sailing through the doors before they'd even opened all the way. Wilbur looped them around the Temple, weaving between skyscrapers and masterfully dodging slower ships. Tommy stayed silent throughout it all, clinging to his armrests and praying, just *praying*.

Finally, Wilbur built up enough momentum and aimed Limbo I's nose towards the atmosphere. With a grunt, he threw the controls forward, and Tommy hurriedly flicked the thrusters system from “planetary” to “open-roaming.”

Limbo I catapulted upward like a stone launched from a sling. As they tore through the lower atmosphere, Tommy chanced a glance behind them.

Smoke billowed from the Temple. Fires still raged, and at their increased distance, Tommy could make out the blues and pinks of plasma cannons and the bright flashes of Jedi lightsabers. The Force wobbled around the whole scene like half-formed gel, inconsistent and weak.

For the first time in months, Tommy's head felt clear. He asked the Force about the people still in the Temple, and it responded coolly, offering him a few of the many presences scattered around.

Tommy immediately disregarded the results, but the ease with which he could use his gift was... breathtaking. Was that how the Force was supposed to feel?

“Yes.”

Tommy flinched, startled, and shot Wilbur a confused look. His Master returned it evenly.

“You remember that dark side vergence at the center of Coruscant?” Wilbur continued quietly. Tommy nodded once. “Yeah. It gets to you more than you think, especially when there's so many emotions consistently at play.” Wilbur's grip on the controls tightened fractionally, just enough to turn his knuckles white. “It always should have felt like this.”

Tommy nodded again. He wanted to ask how Wilbur knew so much about vergences, but it didn't feel like a good time. So he instead focused on how quiet it was inside Limbo I. No laser bolts flew around, no rumbling ships, no explosions. Tommy and Wilbur had escaped the Temple, and they were leaving Coruscant behind.

They'd fucking *done* it.

The next hour passed in silence. Wilbur charted a course for Anaxes so they could pick up supplies before figuring out an actual destination. Immediately after, he hobbled over to his workbench to fix the kinks in his nerve connectors, so Tommy settled onto the main sectional to clean his prosthetic. After all, it had been nicked a few times.

Tommy stared down at his durasteel hand. It gleamed under the overhead lights, a brilliant, shiny silver. He flexed his fingers one at a time, watching as each joint bent in response to his commands.

Then his walls cracked and shattered.

Emotions burst out in overwhelming waves, and suddenly, Tommy's chest was five sizes too tight. He gasped for air, clutching at his chest and choking on his own tears. Guilt and anger and misery crashed around his head. It was all too loud, too much, too *everything*-

An arm settled around Tommy's shoulders. It was followed by a gentle tug, and Tommy found himself curled against Wilbur's chest, his face half-buried in the taller man's robes.

“Breathe,” Wilbur murmured. “Breathe. We made it.”

A fresh wave of guilt tore at Tommy's throat, and he let out a strangled noise. “No fucking way,” he sobbed once he finally managed to form the words. “It's *never* that fucking easy. Schlatt must be on his way right now. Or he's sent a ship after us, and once he catches us, we're gonna have to go back to Coruscant, and-”

The Force rippled gently. Tommy paused, confused, and when he pried his eyes open, he found Wilbur holding a detachable screen in his right hand. The screen displayed their surroundings, as well as Limbo I's stats.

“Look,” Wilbur urged softly. Tommy did, and Wilbur's hand lifted to gently run through his hair. The touch soothed him more than he wanted to admit. “We're not being followed. No one even noticed that we left.”

Faces flashed through Tommy's head. “Tubbo,” he whispered. Melancholy drifted through their bond, and Tommy squeezed his eyes shut against the hot sting of tears, pressing his face into Wilbur's shoulder. “Technoblade. Philza. They'll fucking know. They'll fucking know that we

abandoned them.”

“So?”

One word. Tommy used it so often, either to get his way or irritate the hell out of someone. At that moment, that one word felt like his saving grace.

“Phil and Techno will understand,” Wilbur continued, and he tossed the detachable screen aside. “And Tubbo has Dream. I’d bet you fucking money that Dream’s going to get the hell out of there, too. They’d want us to be safe. I told you before; we aren’t leaving for good. Just for now.”

*Just for now*, Tommy repeated blearily.

Wilbur was so, so warm. They were both caked in ash and soot, their robes streaked with dirt and their hands grimy as shit. But Wilbur was real and *alive*.

Years ago, Tommy had questioned if Wilbur could even beat him in a fight.

Now, he knew that his Master could do the impossible.

“You saved me,” Tommy mumbled. He leaned back enough to peer up at Wilbur’s face, and he couldn’t help but smile weakly at the taller man’s startled expression. “You promised you would. And you did. You fucking saved me.”

A beat. Two.

Wilbur’s Force presence burned even brighter, brighter than Tommy had ever seen it before.

“Wouldn’t have made it out of there without you,” Wilbur returned quietly, and he wrapped both arms around Tommy’s back. Tommy slumped into the hug without complaint. And, if ever asked, Tommy would deny it until the day he died – but in the moment, he tucked his head underneath Wilbur’s chin, settling his ear over his Master’s heart.

For a few moments, that was how they stayed. Then Wilbur began speaking again, low and soft.

“Listen, Tommy. I’m not gonna lie and say that shit’s gonna be easy for us. But if there’s one thing you choose to believe in this life, make it this: I will die a thousand times over before ever letting Aries touch you again. You’ll never lose another hand as long as I live.”

“What about a leg?”

The quip tumbled out before Tommy could stop it. But Wilbur instantly let out a snort of laughter, and Tommy couldn’t help a proud little smile. He was too tired to understand the full gravity of Wilbur’s promise, but... it brought him peace.

Tommy dearly wanted to celebrate their newfound freedom by sleeping, but before he could drift into the bliss of darkness, Wilbur jostled him awake. Tommy grumbled, irritated. Wilbur’s only response was a quiet chuckle and a kiss to the top of the head.

“Hop into the ‘fresher before you take a nap,” Wilbur ordered. “You smell like smoke, and I’m not taking that shit with us to Anaxes.”

As playful as the taller man’s tone was, it brooked no argument, so Tommy reluctantly heaved himself to his feet. “Don’t fucking make a habit of that,” he warned, waving a hand vaguely at the patch of hair Wilbur had kissed. “I’m not your fucking little brother or some shit.”

Wilbur's dark eyes glittered. "Fine, *Padawan*."

Tommy glowered. "Fuck you."

"Yeah, yeah. Go take a shower."

This time, Tommy turned and obediently headed towards the 'fresher. As he walked, he slipped out of his robes and tabards and undid his belt, letting them fall to the ground. When Tommy stepped into the 'fresher, he only wore his tunics and his pants.

He looked severely less imposing without the full Jedi robes. And yet, Tommy had never felt so powerful in his whole life. Wilbur's approval flashed across their bond at the thought, and Tommy shot his reflection a fierce grin.

He'd never wear these robes again. From now on, he made his own choices.

---

*It's just like the Underworld.*

George skidded underneath a low-hanging piece of rubble, dragging his fingers along the bricks to slow his turn. He spared only a glance to make sure that his friends hadn't wiped out before refocusing on his navigation.

*The smoke, the fucking smell. I'm right at home.*

A fire burst to life beneath his right arm, and George leaped away. He patted the sparks without even looking down, and ripples of concern and surprise echoed through the Force. George cracked a grim smile. He didn't have time to stop. Every second was precious, and every second *mattered*.

It really was just like the Underworld. When walking through the tight, winding main streets of the lower levels, one had to walk with purpose and a certain danger, lest they be mobbed. While there weren't any obnoxious vendors getting in George's face, the mercenaries posed the same problem. They popped out of nowhere and pulled his attention away from the critical issues.

Movement flashed in the corner of his eye, and George lifted his blaster, firing off two quick shots. He was greeted with a guttural groan, followed by the thud of a body hitting the ground.

Again, concern and surprise rippled through the Force. This time, George identified the emotions as a mixture of Nick's and Clay's, and he barely suppressed a dry chuckle. Before, he'd had the luxury of picking and choosing when he wanted to play God. Now, their survival depended on his viciousness.

A small part of George's mind questioned if his tough shell was necessary or if he was just trying to protect himself from everything going on. He resolutely ignored that nagging thought.

Laser fire flashed overhead in an array of blue, so George grabbed for whoever was directly behind him and hurried to the nearest collapsed building. The meager overhang was barely intact enough to be called an overhang, but it worked as protection.

"What are-" Nick began, his voice a harsh scratch.

George threw a hand in his friend's general direction. Nick instantly fell silent, but the damage had been done. The laser fire had paused, and now, two distinct sets of footsteps crunched towards them.

Clay leaned forward to meet George's gaze, his eyes asking a silent question: *do you want me to deal with them?*

George shook his head. Even though he'd all but turned off his sensitivity, he still felt the way the Force rippled around them. Tubbo's face had been twisted in a wince since they'd left Clay's room, and George had a sinking feeling that if any of his friends tried to use the Force, they'd be put out of commission. That just wasn't an option.

Which left him to defend all four of them. But, really, George didn't mind the arrangement.

A black-clad figure dropped to the ground, its back to him as they scanned the area. A second quickly joined the first, and they put their heads together for a quiet exchange.

George lifted his blaster and fired off four quick shots – two to the back of each figure's head. They went down without a sound, so George waved for his group to follow him once again.

Nick's face had paled by several shades, and Clay's Force presence rippled with discomfort as he stepped over the bodies. Tubbo was the only one who didn't look disturbed by George's act. George filed his anger at that realization away for a later date. No kid should be so comfortable with Underworld brutality – especially not a padawan.

Then again, Tubbo wasn't going to be a padawan for much longer. Not if they succeeded.

George still couldn't wrap his head around the fact that both Clay and Nick had agreed to abandon the Order. Yes, Tubbo was a wonderful kid, but George had expected convincing them to be like pulling teeth. Nope! Nothing of the sort! He'd asked if Clay was sure, and a few minutes later, the four of them had begun their frantic sprint through the Temple.

An ugly coil of jealousy had made itself comfortable in George's mind, too. For Tubbo, Clay and Nick would drop everything, even agreeing to temporary leave to protect the boy. But for George, four years ago? Oh, no, any accommodation was just too much to ask for.

In all honesty, George knew it wasn't a fair comparison. They'd all been kids, just like him, and kids didn't leave their homes – not willingly, anyway. But it still stung. It stung in a way that contributed to the anger pulsing in his veins, fueling his determination to get them out of this fucking Temple.

They didn't have much farther to go, at least – once they made it out of the South Wing, they just had to get to the secondary elevator. With any luck, the hangar would be untouched.

*What happens if we aren't lucky?* George asked himself darkly.

He didn't have an answer for himself.

A sonic boom suddenly rattled the Temple, and George snapped back to full alert. He swung around a few times, searching for the inevitable plasma cannon, but his eyes landed on something else entirely. A bright blue ship was hurtling into the atmosphere. Aries's troops let out a collective roar, but the ship had already become a dark smudge against the sky.

“What the fuck was that?” George demanded aloud. For one horrible moment, he realized it could be Aries's ship. And if it had been Aries's ship, and the mob boss was sending for reinforcements, the Temple was *doomed*. George was perfectly willing to abandon the Order, but reinforcements were a death sentence to the few who remained.

He would admit to being a killer, but he didn't *want* people to die.

Then Tubbo let out a watery laugh. “It’s Limbo I,” the boy announced. Tears clouded his eyes, but Tubbo’s Force presence was bright with relief. “It’s Wilbur’s ship. He and Tommy are getting out of here.”

George cast Tubbo a surprised look, but it was Clay that asked the question.

“Wilbur’s ship?” the Jedi Master echoed. “I mean, I believe you, but- really? You think they left?”

Tubbo lifted his shoulders in a slight shrug. “Wilbur never liked the Order. He broke every rule for Tommy, and if he thought they wouldn’t survive here, of course he’d leave.” The relief in Tubbo’s eyes dimmed, replaced by a dull understanding that made George’s heart twist. “I guess Tommy knew that I’d have you guys. Otherwise, he wouldn’t have left without- otherwise, he wouldn’t have left.”

For a moment, tension hung in the air. The misery painting Tubbo’s face tied George’s stomach into knots, and suddenly, his jealousy vanished. Tubbo didn’t have things any easier. He and the padawan had both been fucked over, just in different ways.

“Let’s go catch up to him,” George said aloud. Tubbo’s gaze snapped up to meet his, and George offered a fierce grin. “I’m a damn good pilot, you know. I could find him.”

Tubbo’s faint smile wasn’t a lot. But it was enough.

George nodded once, then turned and continued his beeline for the Gardens. Once they made out of the Central Wing and got into the Gardens, it was a straight shot to the hangar.

They just had to make it out of the Central Wing.

The closer they got to the Gardens, the more the landscape looked like the Underworld. Fires burned every flammable material, and with the amount of debris crowding the already narrow alleyways, George was running in a crouch. At one point, they had to scramble through a half-demolished building. That was when the devastation had become clear.

The bodies of mercenaries and Jedi alike were crushed. The gildings on the walls were black with soot, and only one pillar still stood. But even that pillar was laced with a web of cracks.

George waved his friends through that building as quickly as possible. It creaked, and each new rumble made the walls shudder.

Then they were out, and George devoted all his attention to their complicated path. Duck, roll, shoot. Shoot again, run like hell. In a particularly narrow alley, a group of five mercenaries ambushed them, and George’s blaster (stolen from another mercenary’s body) was lost to the melee. He switched to his staff, broke a few bones, and kept going. All the while, George kept his ears on his friends.

Tubbo’s wheezing breaths, his weakened lungs undoubtedly made worse by all the hours spent in that fucking factory. Nick, coughing loudly but in better shape. And Clay... the taller man was near silent. He ran along silently, never disrupting George’s instructions and barely speaking.

It was wrong. George and Clay had never really gotten a chance to talk, and it irritated George in a way he knew it shouldn’t. They should be running side by side and planning their next moves, just like Techno and Philza.

Instead, they were still close to strangers. They had moments where things felt a little less broken, but ultimately, George led, Clay followed, and gods-damn it, George wished things were different.



He *should* have a best friend, he *should* have been able to help with Tubbo, he *should* have grown up alongside Nick. He shouldn't be able to kill without hesitation, and he shouldn't fucking know how to get them through this nightmare of a situation!

If the Force were a tangible being, George would have asked it: *why? Did you decide that I was your unlucky test subject, or was there another reason? Was it to make everyone else better?*

A violent tremor suddenly rocked the Temple, and George's thoughts came to a stuttering stop. He dug his heels in and threw an arm out to halt his friends. Nick crashed into his forearm.

“What?” the younger man demanded. “What's-”

“Shush,” George ordered. Nick instantly fell silent. “There's- I don't know.”

A presence appeared at his shoulder, followed by a gentle hand on his shoulder and a quiet voice. “I feel it, too,” Clay mumbled.

George nodded slightly. There had been something *wrong* with that last tremor. Something in the Temple had shifted, and it made George's fingers twitch with anxiety. The Gardens was visible past the next few buildings, and-

Wait. The hangar sat below the Gardens, hidden beneath the Temple by a thick layer of metal and concrete. But a strong blow from either a bomb or a plasma cannon would be more than enough to shatter the concrete and eat away at the metal.

Oh, holy fucking Kantos.

“Run!” George bellowed. He grabbed Nick's arm, latched onto Clay's wrist, and took off at a sprint, unceremoniously dragging both of his friends with him. They cursed and stumbled, but eventually, they got their feet underneath them. George glanced back to ensure that Tubbo had followed him, then devoted all his attention to the Gardens.

Cracks had appeared in the walkways. They shattered outwards from a rapidly widening focal point, and as George walked, chunks began to fall through.

If they couldn't get to the hangar, they were completely and utterly fucked.

“Jump over the cracks!” George ordered, shoving Nick and Clay ahead of him. He dropped back to Tubbo's side, then planted his hands on the padawan's back and pushed him forward as well.

“Don't stop until you've outrun the shatter!”

Nick began pulling away from them, his arms and legs pumping. Clay grabbed Tubbo's arm and dragged him forward, and soon, both Master and Padawan had passed Nick.

The cracks were widening. More chunks had fallen away. Through the gaps, ships were visible in their clamps. Some had already been smashed to pieces.

*Shit, shit, shit*, George thought desperately. *They aren't fast enough.*

He was an acceptable loss. But Tubbo, Clay, and Nick? They had to survive.

George extended his staff and flicked the electricity setting up to 6. *Sorry, guys*, he thought, and a hint of guilt touched his mind. Then George swung his staff with all the strength he had left.

The long pole connected with his friends' back and exploded with electricity. The three of them let

out identical shrieks of surprise and pain, and they were tossed forward, sailing across the growing gaps and stumbling on the landing. They *made* it.

And then, the Gardens shattered.

George skidded to a stop as the walkways collapsed in on themselves, trees, shrubs, and flowering plants all tumbling into the abyss. Chunks of rocks vanished, and still, the cracks didn't stop. The lines hurtled towards George. By some divine providence, the fault line stopped a few feet in front of him. But to his right, the cracks kept going, racing across the stones until they reached the foundation of the nearest building.

Nothing.

Nothing?

Something gave a horrific crack, and George's heart punched through his chest with a horrible *thud*. Before he could think, move, or even plead for the gods to have mercy, the massive, seven-story building began to topple towards the new hole in the Gardens.

The world slowed to nothing. George stared at the falling building, horrified, and suddenly, the Force rippled. Terrified screams rattled around George's head. There were *people* in that building. Somehow, there were idiot people who hadn't evacuated in that building, and they were- they- they-

In the blink of an eye, George was cast four years into the past. He stood on top of a building in the Midtown District, watching in terror as a ship careened into the side of a nearby skyscraper. Sparks flew, people screamed, and slowly, the building began to tip.

It was happening again. It was happening all over again.

Instinct came to life before the rest of George's brain did, and he desperately threw his hands out, frantically reopening his connection to the Force and begging for it to answer his call. It did. He caught the toppling building with shaking hands, and instantly, sharp knives of pain drove into George's brain. He let out a strangled scream, but acknowledging his agony only made it worse. It felt like his memories were superimposing themselves over each other, see-sawing him between Midtown Coruscant and the Jedi Temple.

But it didn't matter which place he stood. George was the only thing standing between a calamity and the loss of thousands of lives.

And he wasn't strong enough.

George's legs gave out from under him, and he collapsed to his knees with a gasp of pain. His vision swam, his arms shook, and all the while, needle after needle drove into his brain. Vaguely, George recalled Eret's warnings from all those months ago: *We believe that you accidentally injured your mind. You repressed your connection to the Force for so long that it stunted your growth.*

Four years. Four years and four fucking months, and George still wasn't strong enough.

George blacked out for just a moment, enough to send him gasping for air. When he could see straight again, the Temple building had inched closer to the ground. People were still screaming. The past still shimmered before him like a mirage.

Then the years raced past George's eyes. The skyscraper collapsed, the Force screamed with the

pain of all the lives lost, and George stumbled into the Underworld with his cheeks still wet. His shop. His deals. His allies, his enemies, the way his name was whispered when he walked by. Down there, he hadn't been exiled Padawan George Lore. He'd been revered engineer 404.

George clenched his fists, and the dark spots receded from his eyes.

No. He wasn't doing this again.

George shoved the building as hard as he could, then released his Force hold and dashed forward, drawing his staff from his belt as he went. Everything hinged on leverage. The building hadn't collapsed in on itself, so there had to be internal support. All George had to do was keep it from falling.

George glanced to his left and right, eyeing the surrounding buildings. He charted his course, took a deep breath, and pressed all the Force power he still had into his legs, and *jumped*.

*“What did you do, George? What happened?!”*

*“I don't know! The building started to fall, and I- I- Master, please-”*

*“Oh, gods, the Force... what did you do?!”*

*“I tried to save them! I didn't- I thought I could save them!”*

George landed on the side of the building, crashed his staff into the supporting pillar, and hurriedly looped his grappling hook around the steel support. For just a moment, George caught sight of his own reflection.

A hard set to his jaw, determined eyes, and scars lining his face.

He wasn't a kid this time.

He swiveled, planted his feet, and launched himself towards the other still-standing building.

*“Please! Masters, I didn't- I wasn't-”*

*“I do not tolerate such fatal weakness in my padawans! You are one of the strongest members of this Temple, and you failed to follow our most basic mandate: save the lives of the innocent!”*

*“Cho-Nal, take a breath. You aren't thinking clearly, and George here is only-”*

*“How dare you interrupt me! Know your place, Eret!”*

*“Master!”*

*“Quiet, Padawan!”*

The crashing building had almost reached George's wire. He again smashed through the concrete surrounding the steel support, then balanced his staff against the backside. Everything was riding on the strength of Jedi construction and his staff – his stupid, Old Empire staff that he'd stolen from a slave trader that had tried to capture him. How ironic that it would be one day be used to save lives.

George gritted his teeth. *This is gonna hurt like hell.*

The building hit the wire, swayed, and caught.

Fire instantly shot up George's arms, and he let out a pained hiss, planting his feet against the steel support. By some miracle of modern engineering, his grappling hook's wire was supporting the fallen building. George's staff bent like a recurve bow, and George's hands screamed from how tightly he was holding on. But the people weren't dead. Not yet.

Though it felt like plunging into a barrel of acid, George summoned up all the strength he had left. He took a deep, deep breath. Then he howled into the Force.

*GET OUT.*

As soon as those two words were out, George knew he couldn't shout a second time. Sheer stubborn will was all that was keeping him upright.

But when the first Jedi escaped the falling building, he felt their Force presence.

George felt every single escapee. Jedi, padawans, Knights, elders, scholars, and regular workers. They left the building one by one, helping each other as they descended to the first floor and clambered through the debris. Somehow, George even caught glimpses of their emotions. Relief. Awe. Joy.

Then a single thought brushed George's mind. He barely even realized it was there, given his delirious state, but once he allowed it inside his shields, its glow warmed his whole being.

*Thank you.*

A young padawan, by the sound of it.

*You're welcome,* George thought back, barely able to string the concepts together.

He felt the change before it actually happened. It was a pluck, a twitch, a difference in the weight. But George had exhausted his body, so all he could do was grimace and watch as his staff strained, creaked, and snapped in two. Both pieces flew from his hands and disappeared into the void. As soon as the wire was gone, the building began to fall as well. With a roar, it smashed into the Gardens and cracked in two, spilling into the hangar below.

George blinked once. *I really hope there's a ship left for us,* he thought blearily. Then the world tilted, and he blacked out.

When George came to, someone was carrying him bridal style, tromping through burning plants. The arms were warm, and the emerald Force presence emanating from the person was more than enough to identify them.

"Oh, thank the gods," George breathed, then dissolved into a coughing fit. Once the dust and ash had been expelled from his lungs, he shot Clay a wan smile. "I was worried you and Nick and Tubbo hadn't made it out of range."

Clay glanced down at him. The corners of his eyes softened, and his grip on George's shoulders tightened ever so slightly. "Of course we did," he murmured. The taller man hesitated just a moment, then swallowed. "I'm sorry about your staff. I saw it break."

George flapped a hand and tried to ignore the way his head spun. "Don't worry about it. I think I was overcompensating a little too much for the whole exile thing. Now put me the fuck down; I can walk."

A shit-eating grin touched Clay's face. "Two more seconds."

“Wh-”

Clay leaped into the crater, and George couldn't even find in himself to be terrified. He just rolled his eyes and waited for the plunge to be over. After several too many seconds of freefall, Clay landed in the hangar, dust puffing up around his boots. But, true to his word, he immediately let George down from his arms. George nodded his thanks and decided not to mention the fact that he could barely walk.

“Where's our ship?” he asked. Nick and Tubbo were nowhere to be seen, but that wasn't a difficult feat, given all the smoke hovering like a malicious monster. “Gods, I can't see shit.”

“It's coming,” Clay soothed. He hesitated again, and George shot the taller man a curious look. Clay's expression became even more pained. “Look, I... I know I've said it before, but... I'm sorry for all the shit I did to you. It was fucking terrible, and you didn't... deserve any of it. I was an asshole.”

George mulled over those words for a few seconds. Anger bubbled to life, but it stemmed from old hurts and defensive instincts. There was sadness, too, and the melancholy of knowing that he'd never get those years of his life back. But, in the end, George just shrugged.

“Thank you,” he said mildly. “But I don't want apologies anymore. I've made my peace, and... I don't want to be a Jedi again. I never did. I'm glad to be leaving.”

There was still unease in the lines of Clay's face, and discomfort was evident in the set of his mouth. But he didn't say anything, and George took that as the best possible outcome.

Neither of them was done healing and learning. Maybe time away from the Temple would help.

Their inadvertent heart-to-heart was interrupted by a freighter peeling around the bend, barreling through the smoke and fires and stopping before them. The side ramp extended, and from somewhere inside, Nick's voice rang out.

“Get in, dumbasses!”

For once, George obeyed the command.

He and Clay just barely made it onto the freighter before Nick slammed the door shut. The younger man (sitting in the pilot's chair) swung the ship's nose towards the open doors, then shot them out of the hangar, around a nearby skyscraper, and up into the atmosphere. George gazed out of the starboard window throughout the episode.

The Temple grew smaller and smaller, and with it, the strain on George's mind eased.

The city became a cluster of lights. Coruscant melted into a string of connected circles, then became amber lines that snaked across the surface. Eventually, the whole planet was visible.

Despite being a Jedi Padawan for years, then becoming a recognized Underworld engineer, George had never been off-planet. He'd never considered it as an option, even with all the hurt he tied to Coruscant. A strange ache swallowed his heart as he watched his home planet get smaller and smaller, melting into the massive void of space.

Seeing Coruscant from afar hurt more than he wanted to admit.

“Hey, Georgie.”

George hurriedly wiped his eyes with the back of his hand, just in case any absent tears had slipped out, then turned.

Nick still sat in the pilot's chair, with Tubbo at his right, perched uncomfortably in the co-pilot's chair. Clay leaned against the wall, and somehow, the taller man's exhausted smile eased George's feeling of loss.

He still had his friends. They weren't going anywhere.

“That was some shit you pulled,” Nick continued softly. “You alright?”

George cracked a tired grin. “No. I'm fucking sore.”

Nick chuckled. “Amen. Listen, uh... I don't know who owned this ship, but I know it has bunks and shit, so... go take a nap or something. We'll figure out where we're going once you wake up.”

“Who died and made you captain?”

Nick rolled his eyes dramatically, and George allowed himself a smug snicker before heading towards the back of the freighter. True to Nick's word, two bunks were neatly stacked against the walls, and they were just long enough for George to comfortably lay down. *Clay's gonna be suffering*, George noted with a hint of amusement. *But he'll survive.*

George was just about to crawl into the tiny space when a hand latched onto his elbow. It was Tubbo, his face tinged pink.

“Thank you,” the boy mumbled. George raised his eyebrows, and Tubbo flushed an even darker crimson. “For helping us- *me*- escape. I wouldn't have made it without you, and-” A glimmer of awe flickered to life in Tubbo's eyes. “I've never seen anyone use the Force like that. You stopped a whole building.”

So young. So much potential to become anything he wanted.

George smiled faintly and rested a hand on Tubbo's shoulder. “You're stronger than me,” he said lightly. Tubbo instantly inhaled, probably to protest, and George pressed on. “No, no, you fucking are. You just don't know it yet. It's *your* gift, alright? Do what you want with it. Doesn't matter what anyone else says.”

Thinly-veiled hope touched Tubbo's face. “I- okay. Okay.”

“Alright. Can I sleep now?”

Tubbo released George's elbow with a flare of embarrassment, and George grinned, gently ruffling the boy's hair before crawling into the little bunk. As soon as his back hit the mattress, he drifted towards darkness.

Being off of Coruscant wasn't all that bad. They could fly around the system for a few weeks, then head back once things had settled down. If all went well, the Order would win, and they could assist with the construction. George didn't much like the idea of helping rebuild the Temple, but maybe it would be positive. Maybe he could help rebuild the Order's very ideals.

Maybe he could even become the Jedi's first Force-sensitive engineer.

At the very least, George could go anywhere he wanted. It was about damn time that he did what he wanted with his life.

Just before George fell asleep, a scarred hand gently laced their fingers together and squeezed. With the touch came warmth, fondness, and a silent promise that things would change.

George smiled. The whole galaxy was at his feet now.

---

Techno had been away from the Temple for exactly 47 minutes when it happened.

His pursuit of the Night Thief had been routine. He'd trailed the sleek starfighter to a small asteroid belt, then hidden in the shadows while the Night Thief made a call.

Literally. Quackity had extended a deep-space antenna, and after a bit fiddling with his own system, Techno had tapped into the transmission. The conversation had been carried out in some regional dialect of Weequay, so Techno had been utterly lost, but he'd recorded it all regardless. ("Maybe someone in the Temple knows Weequay," Techno had drawled to Phil. He'd gotten a quiet chuckle in response.)

It had been quiet. Underwhelming, almost.

That was when things started.

Techno adjusting his system for the umpteenth time, trying to get a fix on the line the Night Thief had connected to, when his comm to Phil went dead.

His heart shot into his throat. "Phil?" Techno demanded, sitting upright and jabbing a finger against the "talk" feature. Static. "Phil?" he repeated, a little more frantically. More static. "*Phil?*"

Still nothing. Techno abandoned the communicator and reached through their bond, heaving a sigh of relief when Phil's curious presence responded. His partner was clearly distracted, but the peace he sent through their bond settled Techno's hammering heart.

It was fine. It was *fine*. Either the Night Thief had activated a scrambler, or something had gotten knocked out of place.

But Techno couldn't shake his nervousness. His ship, a Vector that he'd named *Theseus*, was perfectly fine.

Then his bond with Phil exploded.

The only thing Techno could distinguish amidst a roaring hellscape was Phil's tormented screams. Techno desperately clapped his hands over his ears, but it did nothing to ease the pain. He was screaming himself (he could tell by the scratch of his throat), but he couldn't *hear* himself. All Techno could hear was Phil; gods, Phil's voice was raw and animalistic, unfiltered agony shooting through their bond. Techno was burning, burning alive, and-

Everything stopped.

Techno gasped, and to his relief, he could hear the sound. He'd tumbled out of his chair at some point, curling into the fetal position. Techno's head still rang, and his equilibrium was clearly off-balance, but it was better than that pure influx of pain.

"Gods," Techno groaned aloud, pressing himself up on his elbows. He took a few deep breaths, then reached out to Phil through their bond. *What happened?*

It was then that Techno noticed. He couldn't feel Phil. Not his partner's pain, not a sense of dizziness, not even the faintest wisp of joy or sadness or *anything*. Their bond, which had been as strong as a stalk of bamboo not two minutes early, was gone. Tattered edges drifted in the ether, leaving Techno staring at nothing. Nothing.

There couldn't be nothing. Phil had been in Techno's mind for years; their bond was *always* there. Phil never closed himself off, never hid. So- so-

No. No, no, *no*, *no*, **no**-

Pure desperation shot through Techno's limbs, and he propelled himself back to his feet, crawling into the seat. As soon as the dashboard lit up with affirmations that, yes, it recognized his weight, Techno jammed the controls to the left. Theseus obediently spun, turning back towards Coruscant.

Oh. Oh, *gods*.

Part of Coruscant had been completely obscured by fire. The red-hot flames rose in a blinding pillar, hiding all the city lights beneath a layer of darkened clouds. It was concentrated, and its position was all too familiar.

The Temple. The Temple had exploded.

For a few seconds, all Techno could do was stare. The plume was hypnotic, captivating, mesmerizing in the way that only destruction could be. Even from as far away as he was, Techno felt the Force's screams. He felt its cries for help, echoed from all the voices it encompassed, only to be drowned out by raging fires and ear-shattering aftershocks.

Then everything clicked, and Techno's entire body began to tremble. He flicked against the thrusters switch, then jammed the controls forward. His Vector leaped forward, hurtling away from Quackity's stationary ship and soaring down towards Coruscant.

Techno ignored the warnings flashing on his dashboard. He didn't slow in the slightest, not even when a transmission from Coruscant air traffic authorities crackled through his radio. Techno slammed his fist against the "deny" button, never once tearing his eyes from the spot where the Temple should have been.

The silence was too loud, and Techno desperately ignored it, clenching Theseus's controls until his fingers went numb. There should be another voice in his head. There should be more *emotions*. But there wasn't, and everything was too quiet, and Techno might never hear that mental voice again.

Theseus broke through the atmosphere. Techno shifted the thrusters, drove his foot against the propulsion pedal, and aimed the ship directly at the center of the inferno.

With a whoosh, he broke through the clouds. Theseus was instantly buffeted by powerful currents, and Techno spent a few agonizing seconds balancing the ship. Once he finally stabilized, he looked down at the Temple.

It was destroyed. All of it. Each wing had been reduced to rubble, and every building was consumed by fire, yellow and orange flames spurting from between piles of debris. The Gardens had turned into a gray field. The final cherry on top was the ash flakes. Gray snow fluttered through the air, lending the demolished Temple an otherworldly, melancholy beauty.

Techno blinked. This wasn't possible. Aries had only brought AT-Tes; there was no way their plasma cannons could have wrought so much damage. Putting that aside, weren't all of Aries's men now dead?



...unless he'd gotten them out ahead of time.

Unless he'd purposefully planted bombs in the Temple.

Unless the initial siege had been a distraction, a way for Aries to mask his true intentions and send his lackeys around the Temple without suspicion.

Bile suddenly burned Techno's throat, and he took a gasping breath, clapping a hand over his mouth. He couldn't feel a thing. The Force was still, as unresponsive and empty as the Temple itself.

Everyone was dead. Everyone. All of the Council, all of Techno's friends, even-

No. No, *he* couldn't be dead.

Techno's body moved without his permission, sending Theseus hurtling down towards the Gardens. He banged the hull on impact, but he didn't even pause to assess the damage, instead throwing himself onto the grass and casting his mind out as far as it could go.

Nothing. Nothing, *nothing, nothing*. Every wing was abandoned. Everything was ruined; everything was gone.

*C'mon*, Techno whispered. *This isn't how you go out. I'm not gonna let this be how you die.*

But it seemed like he didn't have a choice. Even with all of Techno's concentration focused on his search, he was coming up empty. The only thing that remained in the Temple were Force echoes, lost voices quietly asking Techno why they could see their own faces.

A tear dripped down Techno's cheek.

"No," he mumbled aloud. "No, it wasn't- this wasn't supposed to happen. I was worried about you losing another arm, not- not this. You weren't- this wasn't-"

The Gardens listened to him passively, a hot breeze whistling across the charred grass. More tears slipped down Techno's cheeks, but he couldn't stop them. His whole body was shaking, and the entire world felt so, so empty. Techno dropped to his knees.

Phil was... gone. Everyone was.

Techno had always believed there was a fate crueler than death, and for some forsaken reason, the gods had decided to bestow it upon him. Life amongst death. Watching one's loved one die but being unable to join them.

He hadn't even been able to say goodbye.

"No," Techno choked out again. A shuddering sob pushed its way through his lips, and suddenly, Techno found himself crumpled against the grass. Vaguely, he heard himself crying, but it was a detached realization. All he could really feel was... cold. The cold of the burnt grass, the cold of the breeze. Everything was cold.

And then, in a horrible, crashing wave, Techno's numbness was drowned out. Fury and bone-deep agony ripped at his insides, clawing his heart to shreds and tearing every piece of joy he'd ever felt into scraps.

The coldness of Techno's limbs melted. The same inferno that had destroyed the Temple burned it

away, and in the blink of an eye, it felt like every inch of Techno's body was on fire. His hands began to shake again, but this time, it wasn't from delayed grief.

It was hatred. Unbridled, all-consuming hatred.

Techno screamed.

The sound tore itself from his throat, but as soon as it was out, Techno poured everything he felt into it. The tiny part of his brain that wasn't incoherent realized that he sounded like a wild animal – more monster than man. But at that moment, he didn't care who heard him.

As Techno's scream grew louder and louder, so did his Force presence. It spiraled around him in blades of power, blood red and emerald green slicing through each other and turning amber wherever they connected. The sight only fueled Techno's hatred.

Aries had done this. Aries had taken everyone Techno loved, all in the name of what? Business? Wealth?

Techno would tear it all down. He didn't care how long it took. Aries's empire might be one of the most powerful under the world, but Techno had nothing to lose and nothing to stop him. He flung his Force blades away from him, hurtling them to every corner of the Temple. He wallowed in the emptiness, absorbed all the suffering and anguish and *fear* that soaked the grounds and-

A burst of life.

Techno gasped, startled from his dark, downhill spiral. Someone was still alive. Someone had reacted to his Force burst, either by choice or instinct, and Techno hurriedly expelled another shockwave of power.

The South Wing. Buried beneath the rubble but blissfully free from any major injuries. Emerald green, and so, so familiar.

It had to be a cruel trick. The gods had never been kind to him, and Techno couldn't believe that they'd start being kind now. But he'd never been a strong man. So Techno took a shuddering breath and carefully, oh so carefully, reached out to the space where his bond with Phil had been.

*Phil?* he whispered.

A horrible moment of silence. Then:

*Techno.*

Techno all but flew. He tore across the Gardens, stumbling over rocks and broken marble and flopped arms and legs. His heart was in his throat, crashing against his windpipe and making it impossible to breathe. He fixated on that same glow in his chest, that tug that would lead him straight to Phil.

Phill, who was still *alive*.

A fire in the South Wing suddenly roared a little brighter, and the tug in Techno's chest grew stronger. He immediately changed course, hurtling towards the bonfire. If that had affected Phil, then he had to be nearby.

There! A halo of blond hair poked out from next to a pile of rubble. Techno tossed himself over the last couple of obstacles, then dropped to all fours and scrambled up to the center of the glow.

Phil laid in the rubble. His hair was streaked with ash and dust, and his robes were torn. In the few minutes it had taken Techno to make it across the Gardens, he seemed to have escaped whatever debris prison had captured him. Thankfully, Phil's body was devoid of injuries aside from the odd gash. But even his uninjured state wasn't the most pressing matter.

Phil's piercing eyes were clear and alert, watching Techno's frantic approach with stark relief.

"Techno," the shorter man croaked. "I couldn't feel you for a minute. I thought you'd fucked died up there."

"Felt like it," Techno gasped out. He dragged Phil from away the erupted fire, then sagged to the ground, pulling his partner against his chest. Phil leaned into his hold. "Gods. Are you- are you okay? You're not hurt?"

"Not hurt. I got most of the shockwave, so, uh... my ears are kind of ringing. But my body's fine. I was protected by the fucking pillar that fell on top of me."

A giddy laugh bubbled out before Techno could stop it. He buried his face in Phil's hair, and for a few seconds, all he did was exist. Phil's shuddering shoulders chased the darkness from his mind. His partner wrapped rough fingers around his own, and suddenly, Techno could breathe properly again. He was crying again, but the hatred and anger were gone.

Phil's prosthetic hand gently fisted in Techno's robes, and Techno reluctantly pried his eyes open. Phil was staring at something near the Eastern Walls, a frown creasing his brow.

"Aries is back," the shorter man reported briskly. "I just saw his fucking speeder bike. We have to get the fuck out of here."

Right. Techno could have a quiet moment later – right now, he and Phil had to escape.

Techno clambered back to his feet, slipping an arm under Phil's shoulders and hauling his partner up. As soon as Phil stopped wobbling, they began the trek back across the Gardens. It was completely open. Techno hated the vulnerability, but it was the most direct escape route.

Of course, the gods decided that was where their streak of luck ended.

"Master Technoblade! You know, I was wondering if you'd come back, even with the Temple in its current state. But little Tubbo was right – you really can't live without him."

In any other situation, Techno would have kept moving. He and Phil could outrun a few mercenaries. But the oh-so-distinct click of a blaster stopped him dead in his tracks. Techno shot Phil a tired look (which his partner returned), then slowly pivoted.

Aries stood on top of a nearby ruined building, looking for all the world like a conqueror surveying his new lands. The comparison made Techno's blood boil, and he was gratified by Phil's matching thrum of anger.

"What do you want?" Techno shouted.

Aries made a show of thinking. "You, dead," the mob boss decided eventually. "Both of you. But I'm a curious man; it's one of my vices. I heard you two were the strongest Jedi in this fucked-up Order, and I've just killed everyone you ever loved. Well, not loved. I also heard you couldn't love, but maybe you broke that rule, too."

Techno swallowed his pride. It tasted like acid. "And?"

“And, like I said, I’m curious. Two wild cards with no one around to stop them, and me exposed from every angle.”

*We've got mercenaries surrounding us, Phil reported through their bond.*

*I know. I noticed.*

“So, Master Technoblade!” Aries continued, far too cheerfully. “What are you going to do? Your partner was on the brink of death for a few minutes there. Doesn't that make you mad?”

The worst part was that the mob boss was right.

Techno leveled a glare at the jubilant man. It would be so, so easy. All it would take was a well-placed Force blast, and Aries would go tumbling into the crater his siege created. Mere mortals couldn't survive a fall like that. The man was only human, and-

A hand latched onto the front of Techno's robes and dragged him out of his thoughts.

“Don't,” Phil rasped against Techno's shoulder. “I'm alive. We need to get out of here.”

One simple command and Techno's anger vanished. He glanced back at Aries, and though the challenge on the mob boss's face infuriated him, he focused on the blaster the man held. It was larger than most models, built for power, not speed. The only reason Aries could “hold them at gunpoint” was because he'd established his position beforehand.

“Do you believe in a god, *Schlatt?*” Techno called.

The mob boss shrugged. “Sometimes. What's it to you?”

“Say your prayers and hope that they take pity before we meet again.”

And with that, Techno made the stupidest decision of his entire life. He drew his lightsaber from his belt, activated it with a flick, and chunked the active blade as hard as he could.

Aries recoiled with a bellow of surprise, and Techno whirled around, tightening his grip on Phil's shoulders and taking off through the debris. He heard the mob boss's irate shouts trailing after them, but he didn't stop. As long as they outran the mercenaries, they'd survive.

While Techno's provocation certainly hadn't helped matters, he didn't regret it. Regardless of the situation, Aries would have wanted them dead. Mob bosses didn't like loose ends.

In some twisted way, Techno hoped his survival haunted Aries. He wanted the mob boss to think of him and scowl, irritated by his memories of the sole survivors of what had otherwise been a massacre.

*We'll find him again.*

Phil's voice was quiet, cold. His eyes were just as hard.

*I know, Techno muttered.*

The next five minutes were spent in dead silence. Techno stifled each grunt of pain as his hands were scorched by stray flames, and though Phil felt flashes of searing heat from walking so soon after nearly being blown up, he didn't voice his pain. It just cycled through their bond, accompanied by hissed curses.

Finally, Techno hauled Phil over the last hill. Theseus waited for them, and in all its pristine glory, it looked like a chariot to heaven.

“We're gonna need a bigger ship,” Techno noted as he helped Phil into the passenger seat. “One that we can live in. And hopefully one that's less conspicuous.”

“No shit,” Phil chuckled. “You're not gonna pawn this off, are you?”

Techno paused halfway through clipping his harness. “No,” he decided after a moment, lifting Theseus off the ground and swiveling the ship around. Lasers flew past the hull. Techno ignored them. “It means a lot to me. I can call in a few favors, and that should keep us fed for a few weeks.”

“Whatever you say.”

Their jovial conversation didn't feel right. Techno swallowed a little, then launched Theseus away from the Temple. He steadfastly refused to look back at the ruins, refused to reach into the Force again. It was all so empty.

He'd been lucky to save Phil from the rubble. But how many had actually died? How many of Techno's friends were buried beneath the fire and brimstone?

How many had Aries killed?

Techno navigated Theseus back to the spot where he'd spied on the Night Thief, and to his annoyance, the other ship was gone. Techno hadn't honestly expected things to be that easy, but still. It would have been a great starting point.

Techno let out an exhausted sigh and leaned back, resting his head against Phil's knees. Gentle fingers instantly began combing through his hair, and Techno closed his eyes at the touch.

“So many people are dead,” he mumbled. “So many. I want to go back and look for Wilbur and Tommy, but-”

“They weren't at the Temple.”

Techno's eyes flew open. “What?”

“Yeah. I was gonna tell you down there, but then Aries- doesn't matter. Yeah, Will and Tommy are alive. I saw Limbo I take off before the explosion. Another shuttle followed them, and I'm pretty sure I felt Dream and Tubbo onboard. I doubt they'd leave without George and Sapnap, so... I think they're alive. I think they're all alive.”

Techno took a deep, deep breath. The deep ache that had consumed his heart was still voraciously chomping away at his spirit, but its bite lessened. The Order hadn't been completely wiped out. Techno's friends had survived, and that was a start.

“We have to catch up with them,” Techno murmured. “We have to make sure they're okay.”

“I know. But I don't know where they are.”

Phil still hadn't stopped carding his fingers through Techno's tangled hair, and absently, Techno realized it was the first time his partner had ever done so. Phil had shouldered the burden of the "strong" one, but he clearly couldn't keep it up. Neither of them could.

Techno twisted in his seat until he faced Phil, and he shot his partner a weary smile. "I guess it was kind of pointless for us to leave the Order," he croaked. "There isn't an Order to go back to."

Phil's smile was just as ragged. "Yeah. Someone would have beaten your ass for throwing your lightsaber like that." Phil tilted his head a little. "Why'd you do that, by the way?"

Techno thought for a moment.

Pain. Anguish. Betrayal and hurt. Repulsion.

"It wasn't mine," he decided eventually. "It's always been Ra-Lune's. Never a better time to let the past die."

At that, Phil let out a weak laugh. "Helluva life change," he said softly.

"Yeah."

They were both silent.

Tears suddenly slid down Techno's cheeks again, but he didn't make a move to wipe them away. He just held Phil's gaze, letting every single rampant emotion drift through their bond. In return, Techno heard Phil's angry screams, his partner's fury at his life being taken in such a stupid way. He felt guilt, loss, and fear – and the horror of realizing that Phil would never get to say goodbye.

Techno tipped his head forward with a watery chuckle. When Phil gently rested his forehead against Techno's, Techno didn't pull away.

"This is all so fucked," Phil mumbled, barely loud for Techno to hear. "The Order is fucking dead, Techno. Aries won, and we- we couldn't do anything. We couldn't *do* anything."

"I know." Techno straightened and twisted back to face Theseus's controls. "Listen, I saved that transmission the Night Thief was sending out. It was entirely in Weequay, so we should head to Sriluur. Maybe we can pick up a lead there."

"Yeah. What are you thinking?"

Techno opened his mouth, then closed it again. He began flicking switches and priming his Vector for intergalactic travel, but through their bond, he admitted his plans.

*I don't care if Aries did this for fun or as a business deal. I want to know everything about him. I want to figure out who he is, topple his empire, and leave him with nothing. He doesn't get to kill the Jedi Order and get away with it.*

Verbally, Phil said nothing. But their bond lit up with fierce approval, and a warm hand landed on Techno's shoulder. Techno laced their fingers together and punched in the coordinates for Weequay with his free hand.

It didn't matter that the Order was gone. So long as Phil and Techno were alive, the memories of their friends were alive. And they wouldn't rest until every last one of them had been avenged.

It didn't matter how long it would take.

Techno squeezed Phil's hand one more time, then pushed the controls forward. With a hum, Theseus launched away from Coruscant.

## Chapter End Notes

As always, thank you so, so much for reading. I still can't believe that we've finally reached the finale of the last arc, and I have y'all to thank for being here throughout this journey. Please leave a comment if you enjoyed this chapter!

Have a wonderful week, my dear readers! I will see you one last time for the posting of the epilogue!

# Epilogue - Future Premonition

## Chapter Notes

I finally added a proper prologue to this story :) consider checking that out before you go into this epilogue if you want the full impact of its symmetry (as well as some needed backstory that I neglected to add until now)!

If you choose to dive right in, I hope you enjoy the final update! Don't worry, I'll save all my sappy nonsense for the endnotes lol

TW for semi-graphic violence and mentioned death. Always read safely!

(Author's note, 9/21/21: I have recently learned that Quackity and Jschlatt are both not okay with shipping, which I didn't know when I wrote this story. I do not currently have the time to go back and fix the implied romance, but please know that I was unaware of that boundary at the time. I apologize /gen)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

*Two months after the Third Temple Siege...*

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The probe droid froze, its antenna flicking back and forth. It hummed, sounding for all the world like it was contemplating a thought, then turned and floated away. It dodged between the debris as only a digital mind could, weaving between broken pillars, crumbled buildings, and shattered panes of glasses.

Bad let out a sigh of relief as the droid disappeared from view. "We're clear," he reported. The runes burning in the air turned a warm amber, then dissolved in a flurry of sparks, and Bad turned to his companion. "We only have about ten minutes before my shields wear off."

Eret inclined his head slightly. "Understood. This is a fast trip."

Bad nodded in return, and they split off. Bad immediately peeled off towards the North Wing, but he spared two extra seconds to make sure Eret hobbled under the shelter of a building before turning away. Even with crutches, Eret shouldn't be running on a broken leg.

But Bad couldn't stop his friend no matter how much he pleaded. Every time he approached the subject of Eret taking a break, a hard edge entered the other man's eyes. So Bad kept his mouth shut.

Another droid suddenly appeared between two collapsed buildings, and Bad's heart shot into his throat. He threw himself behind the nearest wall, frantically strengthening his shielding runes. But his concern was unfounded - the droid floated by without ever once glancing his way. Bad counted to five before resuming his dash.



By some divine stroke of luck, Bad made it to the North Wing without a single altercation. He ducked through the remnants of what had once been the infirmary's main doors, then clambered into one of the few buildings still standing.

The infirmary had escaped mostly unharmed. Bad had uncovered a grand total of four undetonated bombs scattered around the infirmary's ruins, which he attributed as the only reason it still held its shape. Still, it hadn't escaped the dust, the aftershocks, or the bomb placed in the courtyard beyond its entrance. Bad ducked underneath low-hanging wires and dripping pipes as he picked through the rubble.

Without the Force, Bad was more or less navigating on a touch-only basis. He peered into each room and moved on if there was nothing was of interest. It was slow-going, especially given the countdown ticking in the back of his head. But there were no other options. In the ruins of the Temple, one had to shut themselves off from the Force. It was the only way to avoid the echoes.

Yet another reason why Bad had worried about Eret's safety. But the other man had brushed it aside every time it was addressed, and eventually, Bad had stopped asking if Eret was okay. He wasn't sure he'd get a straight answer even if Eret ever answered him.

Bad crawled through a crack in the main hallway and dropped into the patient room beyond. He was greeted by medical equipment, bottles of pills, and bandages, and Bad couldn't help a small sigh of relief.

About time they got a good haul.

Everything useful went into the empty sack slung over Bad's shoulder. He carefully settled all the still-functioning equipment at the bottom, then piled the more fragile items on top. By the time Bad had finished raiding the room, the sack was almost filled.

As he headed back to the crack in the wall, Bad's gaze landed on a stuffed starfish sitting on the demolished bed. It was blackened with soot and fire, and one of its limbs was torn off.

Bad turned away.

It was odd, ransacking his own home. Bad equated it to a child pretending they were some sort of hero, then fighting off their “monstrous” pet. But, as he crawled over piles of rubble and skimmed his fingers against the ivy-covered wall, Bad had to admit that the Temple didn't feel like “home.” It was a lifeless ruin, a memory of a once-great people.

Maybe that's all it had ever been.

A terrible *crack* sounded over Bad's head, and panic skittered through his veins. Bad whirled around, raising his hands and inhaling to cast a rune of freezing, then paused. Part of the roof had collapsed, yes, but it was being held in place.

After a moment, the piece of debris lifted from its hole. A feline figure poked their head into view, meeting Bad's gaze with weary eyes.

“Thank you,” Bad said quietly.

Antfrost stared at him for a few more seconds before slipping away wordlessly.

Once the feline disappeared, Bad used the vines to scale the walls and climb out the new hole. It was infinitely easier than clambering back through the infirmary. Once Bad hauled himself onto the roof, he found the entire North Wing sprawled before him.

It wasn't much of a wing anymore. The infirmary was the only building still standing, and the nearby living quarters had been all but razed to the ground. Only the Councilmen's Suites had retained some semblance of their former shape.

Eret suddenly appeared from the wreckage of one of the living quarters. Even from as far away as he was, Bad could make out the hard line of Eret's jaw. His suspicions were confirmed when the other man shook his head once, then turned towards the Eastern Walls. Nothing.

Bad swallowed his disappointment and dropped to the ground, landing in a roll. Within a few moments, he'd gotten to his feet and fallen into place at Eret's side.

"Where's Antfrost?" the other man asked. His voice was even, but the tightness around his eyes told a different story.

"Back at the infirmary," Bad responded softly. "I don't think he's coming with us."

"Never does."

That wasn't a true statement, and they both knew it. But Eret's posture was stiffer than usual, so Bad said nothing. Once, he might have pressed the subject, gently trying to pry Eret's mind open and offer the other man some comfort. It was a pointless venture, now.

But Bad wasn't oblivious enough to say he wasn't without fault. He couldn't give unbiased advice anymore, no matter how much he wanted to.

And he didn't particularly want to address the root of that issue, either.

The next four minutes passed in silence. Bad and Eret wove through the ruins with practiced efficiency, dodging the stationary probes and slipping through shortcuts in the rubble. Like Bad had assumed, Antfrost didn't join them. But, every so often, Bad saw flashes of brown leap between the buildings overhead.

Aries hadn't bothered to patch up the holes he'd made in the Temple's defenses. It served as the perfect entrance and exit, regardless of how the negligence had come about – be it arrogance, amusement, or some misplaced sense of respect.

Bad's shielding runes disappeared just as he and Eret ducked through a hole in the Eastern Walls, but Aries hadn't placed any probe droids outside, either. Bad had a sneaking suspicion that that had been intentional. If the mob boss was anywhere as sadistic as his reputation suggested, he'd *wanted* return trips to be made.

The Temple was green, at least – seeing so many plants and vines winding through the ruins of the Temple gave Bad a strange sense of peace. Even if it was no longer inhabitable for them, flora had taken up residence.

Deep in his heart, Bad hoped that the garden he'd cultivated for George expanded beyond his magical boundaries. All those beautiful plants deserved lives amongst their brethren.

"Bad."

Bad snapped out of his thoughts, and guilt touched his mind. "Sorry," he mumbled, hauling himself into the street. "I was- I was just-"

What could he say that didn't sound stupid? "I was just reminiscing"?

But Eret's eyes instantly softened. The other man patted Bad's shoulder once, briefly, then started off down the street. Bad followed him silently.

A few months previous, Bad and Eret would be the fixture of everyone's attention. A Jedi walking around Coruscant was event enough, but two Jedi, one hobbling along on crutches and the other with black horns poking out of his hair? The rumor mill would have gone wild. As it was, no one spared Bad or Eret a second glance. Exchanging their Jedi robes for loose pants, loose jackets, and various accessories had done wonders to erase their authoritative presences.

Bad kept his head down as he walked. Most surface dwellers were prejudiced towards “dangerous” species, and, well – a daemon definitely qualified as dangerous.

Bad was still getting used to the changes, especially his tail. So many years of looking “human” had irreversibly altered his self-image, and staring at his reflection meant seeing a man with patches of black spreading across his skin, horns sticking out of hair that had turned entirely black, and irises that were melting away. Bad didn't know how to equate that image to *him* - brown hair, fair skin, glasses-wearing him.

*You'll get used to it*, he'd been told, over and over. The “used to it” had yet to come.

Bad and Eret kept up their steady pace through Coruscant. Slowly, they slipped further and further away from the clean, wealthy districts. After a good half an hour of walking, they were firmly in the black market districts. It only took a few further minutes to reach their freighter.

Eret instantly headed for the pilot's chair, so Bad carefully settled his sack in a cubby hole before sinking into the co-pilot's chair. He quickly ran through the start-up sequence, his fingers flying across the buttons that had once confused the life out of him. But for all the learning Bad had done over the past month, he had to admit that Eret was still the better pilot between them.

39 minutes after leaving the Temple, the freighter lifted out of its parking spot and lowered into the huge vent leading to the core.

“There's traffic today,” Eret muttered. A scowl touched his face, and he flicked a few more switches on the dashboard. The ship's rest thrusters audibly cut out for a moment. “Fuck. Looks like it's gonna be a long flight.”

“That's okay,” Bad mumbled, and he swiveled his chair towards the open end of the freighter. “I'm gonna take a nap after I take inventory. Wake me up when we land.”

Eret grunted in response, so Bad heaved himself out of the chair. He pulled his sack from its cubby hole, wandered over to the only table, and carefully laid out his findings.

Bad knew nothing about the equipment, but it was clearly in good space. He made sure each piece of tech turned on and off before putting it aside, and he was pleasantly surprised to find only two non-operational. Aside from the equipment, he'd snagged various pills and two thick rolls of bandages. One roll was a little bulkier than the other, and Bad frowned, carefully peeling back the layers.

Jackpot. Two bacta packs had been tucked between the bandages.

“Eret!” Bad called, unable to hide a smile. “We finally got bacta packs!”

“What? Really?”

The hopeful note in the other man's voice made Bad smile even more, and he glanced over his

shoulder. Eret stared back at him, the faintest hint of his old grin dancing on his face.

“Yeah!” Bad held up the bacta packs, and Eret's grin widened. “Someone was smart enough to stuff them in the bandage roles.”

“Thank the gods. Maybe we can finally replicate it.”

“Yeah!”

Bad began repacking his sack with considerably more cheer than usual. Once everything was neatly stacked, Bad tucked the bag into its cubby, opened the freighter's door, and tossed the broken equipment out.

The first time Bad had littered, he'd nearly had an anxious meltdown. Now, he watched it spiral away with a strange sense of catharsis. It always felt like he was shedding his own worries when he dumped the broken machinery.

Once he secured the door, Bad shuffled over to the freighter's only bunk and flopped onto the thin mattress. His back instantly complained at the firmness, but his exhaustion outweighed the discomfort. Bad drifted off within seconds.

It probably wasn't healthy to be so tired all the time. Bad mentally added the ailment to the ever-growing list of “things to check” and promptly shuffled his concern away for a later date.

All too soon, a hand landed on his shoulder.

“Hey. We're here.”

Bad reluctantly pried his eyes open, then slit them against the bright overheads. “Already?” he mumbled. His voice came out much more whiny and pathetic than he'd meant it to, and Bad cringed internally.

The corners of Eret's mouth twitched. “Yeah. Come on; I got us down to 3800.”

*Only 86 more levels until I can actually sleep*, Bad thought blearily. He heaved himself to his feet and stumbled across the room, slinging his sack over his shoulder. When Eret opened the side door, a wave of stale air tinged with cooked food swept through the cabin. The familiar smell instantly snapped Bad to awareness.

True to his word, Eret had landed the freighter in the 3800 shuttle bay. Clamps had settled around the ship's landing gear, and on the underside of the hull, a current insulator had attached to the ship's mainframe. It was beefy protection, and Bad shot Eret an impressed look.

“I see why everyone likes this bay,” he noted absently.

Eret chuckled, sweeping past Bad to examine the toll stand at the front of their parking space. “Decent rates, too,” the other man said lightly. “Only gonna cost me half of last week's paycheck to stay here for a month.”

Bad couldn't help a quiet laugh. “There's no way we'll be able to keep this spot for that long.”

“I know. But it's the thought that counts.”

Eret stuck his hand into his jacket pocket and brought out a generous handful of credits. He then dumped all of them into the toll stand's collection tray. Bad spared a moment to lament the lost

credits the transaction cost them, but as the toll light flashed green and even more clamps settled around the landing gear, Bad decided the price was worth it. Having to buy another ship would be infinitely more expensive.

They'd already lost one ship. Eret was unreasonably attached to this one, which he'd dubbed Strawberry.

After checking all the clamps (their own examination often saved them from being cheated out of their money), Bad and Eret left the shuttle bay. 3800 was a hectic level, even by Underworld standards. It was often cited as the trade hub of the entire Underworld. Regardless of the validity of that claim, word of mouth and experienced vendors brought customers back time and time again.

Bad didn't bother to keep his head down as he walked. The people of the Underworld were significantly more respectful, and had the situation been invited of his own volition, Bad might have laughed. Of course, Underworld criminals respected his species more than the Jedi Order had.

As it was, the respect just made him feel empty.

Bad absently observed the neon lights and flashing billboards that he and Eret passed. 3800 really was the Trade District. A few novice pickpockets also tried to sneak their fingers into Bad's jacket, but every time, his rune of protection burned their fingertips. Each new yelp of surprise brought a small smile to Bad's face.

Several minutes later, Bad and Eret reached a small, squat hut nestled between two towering pawn shops. Bad stepped up to the door and pressed his hand against the cool metal, feeling for the rune he'd placed. Amber runes immediately lit up on the door's surface, and Bad stepped back, pleased.

A presence suddenly appeared at Bad's shoulder. He flinched, then turned, already preparing a rune of burning. Antfrost stood next to him, hands shoved in his jacket pockets and eyes fixed on the ground.

Sadness touched Bad's heart. Antfrost looked so often looked miserable. Bad knew that the feline refused to close himself off to the Force (probably out of some sense of guilt), but, like with Eret, Bad didn't know how to convince Antfrost to stop hurting himself.

It was beyond his control, really. He didn't like having so many things beyond his control.

The door suddenly unlocked, startling Bad out of his thoughts. On the outside, the hut was just what it looked like – a hut. But on the inside, it was completely hollowed out. The only thing protected by the walls was the three-meter diameter hole in the center of the room.

“I'll go first,” Antfrost murmured.

Bad glanced at the feline, and he couldn't help a frown. But there was an emptiness in Antfrost's eyes that made his stomach wrench, so Bad said nothing. He just nodded once and watched as Antfrost pulled his hands from his pockets, took a short breath, then leaped into the hole in a graceful swan dive.

Silence.

A loud clap echoed up through the hole, reverberating off the walls and making Bad's head ache. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Eret wince. But the clap meant they were safe, so Bad grabbed the strap of his sack, then jumped into the hole feet-first. His stomach instantly began rippling, and as the floors whipped past, the pitch darkness was broken up by teal fire burning in intermittent torches.

Eventually, *something* stopped Bad's fall. The air itself thickened, swallowing him like gel and slowly lowering him to the ground. Two meters from the tunnel's bottom, Bad was dropped from the "gel." He landed with a soft *thud*.

"I will never understand how that works," Bad mumbled, picking himself back onto his feet.

A faint smile touched Antfrost's face. Seeing the expression made Bad happier than he wanted to admit.

A few seconds later, Eret appeared in the torches' light. He slowed in mid-air, then dropped to the ground from two meters up. Eret caught himself with his crutches, but a grimace creased his face as his feet hit the ground. Bad took an instinctive step forward, concerned. Eret instantly waved him off.

Right. What could he really do, anyway?

Bad stuffed down the emotions bouncing around his chest and turned, heading into the tunnel. It was illuminated with the same teal fire torches, and the black bricks gleamed in the faint light.

On his first few trips into the labyrinth, Bad had tromped through puddles of strange liquid and ducked underneath all sorts of strange plant life. Now, two months later, the tunnel system had polished to perfect standards. There were even hidden markings etched at various intervals, serving to guide anyone who'd lost their way in the twists and turns.

Bad didn't need the markings anymore. But he still paused at the first four-way intersection, glancing up at the compass carved into the ceiling. A constellation, a diamond, a fern, and a collection of circles pointing back the way he'd come. Bad turned right, following the fern.

Silence hung over them as they walked. Even with Eret's crutches *click-click-clicking* down the cobblestones and Antfrost's occasional snuffle, the air felt heavy – thick, even. There should be laughter, conversation, gentle ribbing.

But Bad would be the first to admit that he hadn't cracked any jokes in the past months, and if he wasn't, then Antfrost and Eret were even less likely to.

*Time heals, everyone used to say. Time heals.*

No one said that anymore.

After ten minutes of walking and several turns guided by the ferns on the ceiling, Bad stepped into a gigantic cavern.

It towered at least eight stories above, and the enormous plants grouped against the walls made it seem even taller. Every color of flora was scattered around, bathing different corners of the cavern in multicolored light. A lake stretched throughout the cavern, with streams slipping through drains on either side. Bad knew from experience that the water was dumped into filters a level below to be scrubbed of bacteria, refilled with nutrients, and then pumped back up to replenish the lake.

But the brightest attractions of the cavern were the two villages it housed. One was raised on stilts above the lake, and bridges and ropes connected the many platforms. The other was built on the left wall of the cavern, with rooms carved directly into the rocks and houses supported by struts or dangling from the ceiling.

Eret instantly hobbled off towards the collection of wallcrawlers. Antfrost branched right, heading for the field beyond the lake.

Bad pressed his lips together and headed for the water village.

People called greetings as Bad passed by, and he waved back at them, cracking a small smile. Some fished in the lake. Others were doing menial chores, and still more were pairs of adults and young people, deep in conversation.

Their outfits were just as colorful and diverse as the people. Some were outfitted in loose pants and shirts, and others sported flowing robes. The only common theme was that each had been personally stitched together, made from scraps of fabric and ragged Jedi robes.

The Jedi were an adaptive people, more so than Bad had ever expected. Seeing so many happy faces and laughing padawans brought Bad a joy he couldn't explain.

“Good afternoon, Master Bad!”

A gaggle of younglings suddenly emerged from the lake, all dripping wet and beaming.

Bad smiled back at them. “Hello. It looks like you guys were having fun.”

A Twi'lek with brilliant yellow eyes grinned broadly. “Yeah!” he chirped. “Master Salem was right; it's really fun to swim around in there!”

“Yeah, but Master Ippu scolded us for scaring the fish away,” another youngling, a taller Fosh with blue feathers, noted. They shot Bad a sheepish look. “So we have to go talk to Master Salem now. We'll see you later, Master Bad.”

Bad couldn't but chuckle. “Take care. Try not to get into more trouble.”

The younglings hurried off, jostling elbows and shouting at each other as they headed towards the oldest hut in the cavern. It sat on the lowest level of the water village, its bridges connecting one side of the lake to the other. As Bad watched, the younglings jogged up to a man sitting outside the hut, who smiled at their approach.

Salem looked happy, Bad thought. The older man's face was relaxed, and he even shared a jovial wink with the younglings. A collective cheer rose from the group.

“Thank you,” Bad murmured aloud. “You saved us.”

Of course, Salem didn't look up or react in any way. But the former Jedi Master had an uncanny ability to hear things that most didn't, so Bad turned away with the assurance that his thanks had been heard.

Bad scaled a rope ladder and continued upward, waving in return to all the greetings directed his way. Finally, he ascended a short staircase and stepped onto the highest platform of the village.

“Good afternoon, Endo!” Bad called. The nurse tended to be a bit jumpy, so it was always best to announce his presence. The last thing Bad wanted was a bat to the head.

A mop of platinum blond hair poked out from the inner rooms of his makeshift infirmary. A bright grin creased the nurse's face as his eyes landed on the sack slung over Bad's shoulder, and he stepped into the luminescent “daylight.”

“I'm being visited by the Well-Wisher today, am I?” Endo chuckled. “It's a good day already. What did you bring for me?”

Bad pulled his sack from his shoulder and carefully emptied its contents onto the table. Endo's eyes widened.

“By all the gods. You finally got some bacta packs. Not the Underworld shit, either – original Order bacta. Master Bad, you are a saint.” Endo riffled through the rest of Bad's offerings, and the nurse paused over one of the working panels Bad had collected. “Ah, a heart monitor. Good. I can finally keep track of vitals.”

Endo continued to mutter his way through his new resources, and eventually, Bad realized he wasn't needed. “I'll just be on my way,” he said, barely stifled a laugh. “Have a good day, Endo.”

The other man didn't even look up.

This time, Bad allowed himself a chuckle. He turned away from the nurse and began picking his way back through the waterstriders – the affectionate nickname for the water village. After a few minutes of climbing and a handful of chipper conversations, Bad made it to his house.

If asked why he'd chosen a house over the water, Bad couldn't have explained. But, as he settled his empty sack onto its hook and slipped off his shoes, a sense of peace settled over him. His house was about the same size as his Temple room. However, it was significantly more personalized, and trinkets littered every surface. It felt... homely.

Bad wished his friends could have seen it. Dream would laugh at his collection, then immediately sneak something of his own onto the shelves. Sappap and George would bicker about Bad's choice of carpet (a woven mat he'd embroidered himself), and Tubbo... Tubbo would undoubtedly marvel at the protection runes Bad had painted onto the floor and walls. The padawan would point and ask about each one, his eyes alight with curiosity.

Bad's heart squeezed. He swallowed thickly, and it took a few seconds before his eyes cleared of tears.

“Hey, Master Bad! Master Bad!”

The cheerful voice cut through Bad's melancholy like a hot knife. He turned and found a short youngling standing in the open doorway. She beamed up at him, fiery red hair illuminated green by a nearby plant and dark brown skin gleaming with water droplets.

“Hello, Pyre,” Bad said warmly, and his smile came more naturally than he'd expected it to. “You look like you've been busy. Were you scaring the fish with the younglings?”

Pyre puffed out her chest. “No!” she said, mock-affronted – or maybe she was genuinely offended by Bad's assumption; Bad really couldn't tell. “I swam over here from the wallcrawlers! Master Eret came home, and Master Rhodys told me that they were going to have a private conversation, so I came to see you! Besides, I'm a *padawan* now, Master Bad.”

*A padawan without a Temple*, Bad thought bitterly. But he pushed that thought aside and prayed that his worry didn't show on his face. “Did they? Well, I'm happy to see you. Why don't you wait for me outside while I grab some cookies?”

Pyre squealed excitedly and scrambled out of the doorway. As promised, Bad grabbed a packet of cookies from his shelf of supplies and followed the bouncing padawan, carefully shutting the door behind him. Pyre already sat with her legs dangling over the platform, so Bad sat next to her. She didn't hesitate a second before taking the whole pack of cookies.

“Did Rhodys seem worried?” Bad asked softly. He didn't want to pry, but he couldn't deny that he



was concerned for Eret's wellbeing. The last thing the man needed was a domestic argument.

Thankfully, Pyre shook her head. "No, they were smiling!" she said around a mouthful of cookie. "I think Master Eret was not- not happy- sadder than Master Rhodys was!"

Pyre popped another cookie into her mouth, and Bad spared a moment to chuckle. Said sweet treats had been an impulsive purchase from a surface vendor a week ago. Bad had saved up a considerable amount of credits from his odd jobs, and he'd been starving that day. Still, he didn't regret giving them to Pyre – gods knew a growing child needed food more than he did.

That didn't stop Bad from snagging one of the delicious gingerbread cookies, though. He deserved a small commission fee.

"Master Bad?"

Pyre's voice had turned quiet, pensive. Bad glanced over at the padawan and found her frowning.

"Yeah?" he murmured.

"Are we going to have to go back someday?"

Bad froze. Pyre didn't seem to notice his hesitation, and she began fiddling with the hem of her oversized sweater.

"It's really nice down here," Pyre continued, a smile replacing her frown. "I get to be with Master Rhodys all the time. And Master Eret lives with us, and I really, really like having him around. I can go see my friends whenever I want, and sometimes, Master Rhodys takes me into the Underworld. Not the dark parts, though. They just show me the nice places, like the markets and the engineering shops. I didn't get to do that on the surface."

Bad was torn between laughing and crying. Of course the padawans and younglings didn't mind the upheaval. Many suffered nightmares and other afflictions, but most of them had been shielded from the true horror of the Third Temple Siege by quick-witted masters who had guided them into meditative states. Rhodys had done that with Pyre. Others had copied their tactics. Even the padawans who had lost their masters had a whole community to help them deal with their grief.

The young people of the Order hadn't seen their fallen peers. They hadn't lifted rubble off of broken bodies or felt the inky and undeniably *dark* Force bathing the Temple.

"Do you want to go back, Master Bad?"

*I have to answer*, Bad told him numbly. He shook his stupor off the best he could, then took a deep breath. In his years of teaching, he'd learned that younglings and padawans alike responded best to the truth. All people did, really.

"I do," Bad admitted. "I grew up in the Temple. It was the only home I've ever known, and I don't want to leave it."

Pyre's nose crinkled. "But the Order is so strict! The Council told us to do everything perfect, but down here, we can have fun! We don't have a Council anymore!"

The bodies of the Council, strewn around the Temple. Jahra, piercing eyes blank and a laser hole burned through her chest. Mazenos, only his upper half visible beneath a broken pillar. Cho-Nal, draped across a piece of rubble with laser burns riddling his body and two of his arms cut off.

So many more. Masters, Knights, innocent workers, padawans, younglings.

An Order of almost three thousand reduced to three hundred.

“You're right; we don't have a Council anymore,” Bad said quietly. Tears gathered in his eyes, but he quickly swiped them away, turning to face Pyre more fully. She watched him with painfully innocent curiosity. “You're going to grow up differently than me. And I haven't accepted that yet.”

Pyre grinned widely. “If anyone can, I'm sure it'll be you! You've always been a great teacher, Master Bad! You're so much cooler than all my other teachers!”

Bad managed a tired smile, ignoring his mind's dark whisper: *I'm one of the only teachers left*. “Thanks, Pyre,” he said aloud. “That means a lot.”

“Mhm!” Pyre popped another cookie into her mouth, kicked her feet a little, then pointed at Bad's wrists. “What are those? I asked Master Rhodys, but they said they didn't know enough about daemon magic to explain.”

“What?” Bad glanced down at his wrists, confused. Then his gaze landed on the golden runes tattooed on his wrists, and a ball lodged in his throat. “Oh. Ah... these are protection runes. I have them so I can keep my friends safe.”

Pyre tilted her head. “But you don't have any friends.”

The padawan hadn't meant to be cruel; Bad knew. But that simple sentence nearly reduced him to hysterical sobs.

“I don't,” Bad agreed, and a watery laugh slipped out before he could stop it. “They're not here. They left the planet when the bad warriors came to the Temple.”

Pyre jutted out her bottom lip and crumpled the empty bag between her hands. “I with Master Rhodys had taken me away,” she muttered. “I didn't like all the explosions.”

Bad tried to keep his smile, but he knew it was unstable. “But if you weren't here, you wouldn't be with your friends, would you?” Pyre seemed to consider that for a moment. Eventually, she slumped in the defeated slouch of a padawan who'd been outmaneuvered, and Bad laughed softly. “Yeah. I keep three people safe: Master Dream, Knight Sappap, and Engineer George.”

“Oh! I know Sappap!” Pyre chirped. “He helped me find Master Rhodys when Master Delphina-oh, she's not a master anymore, is she? When Delphina planted that bomb! I was really scared, and he made me feel okay!” Pyre nodded to herself, as if satisfied by her own recounting of the story, then flopped onto her back. “I'm glad you're protecting him.”

*I'm not*, Bad almost blurted. But Pyre didn't need to know that. Pyre was a kid who was better at adjusting than most of the adult Jedi were, and as she saw it, this was the most exciting thing that had happened in her young life.

Pyre didn't know about the horrors in the Temple.

A chime suddenly echoed through the cavern, and Pyre perked up.

“That's Master Rhodys calling for me!” she explained. She shoved the empty bag into one of her many pockets, then flashed Bad a toothy smile. “Thank you for the cookies, Master Bad! Have a good day!”

Bad smiled weakly in response. "You too, Pyre."

With that, the padawan turned and leaped off the platform in a surprisingly graceful dive. Bad heard the *bloosh*, and for the next few minutes, he watched Pyre splash across the lake, then scramble up the wallcrawlers' main staircase. If Bad squinted, he could make out Eret and Rhodys sitting on their balcony, and both laughed when Pyre came running up to them.

*No fear*, Bad thought dully. *She's completely lost her connection to the Force, but she hasn't stopped. I could learn something from her.*

While Bad had no delusions about the source of his poor mental health, he knew losing the Force had only made everything worse. The Temple was all but steeped in the Dark Side, its goodness culled by death and hatred. And in the Underworld, the Dark Side vergence buried deep near the core made the Force wobbly and unfocused. Besides, after the reports of George caving to the Dark Side and Wilbur and Tommy's examination of the vergence's strength... most of the surviving Jedi had decided it was wiser to close themselves off from the Force for the time being.

But it wasn't a permanent solution. Aside from people like Eret and Antfrost, who were stubborn enough to slog through the darkness, and Kan Bo Salem, who had spent years in the Underworld, the survivors were suffering without the Force. Best case scenario, they found a way to "purify" the Force in their new sanctuary. Worse-case scenario, everyone would slowly injure their minds until they lost the ability to sense the Force at all.

Bad rubbed his eyes. And for him, it meant his daemon magic was shining through. It was changing him, and even if they found a way to reconnect to the Force, he'd forever *look* like a daemon.

But he could have lived with that if only his magic was strong enough to fuel his protection runes. But it wasn't. Bad had powered those runes with his deep magic and the Force, so without the Force, he couldn't protect his friends at all. The only thing his tattoos provided was the knowledge of life and death.

When Bad ran his fingers over his runes, three heartbeats sounded beneath his fingers, accompanied by very, very faint auras.

Green, blue, amber. Dream, George, Sapnap.

Two months of no contact. Two months of knowing that Dream, George, and Sapnap were out there somewhere. But aside from those three (plus Technoblade, as Eret had said that the pig Jedi had left the planet before the explosions), Bad was clueless. Had Tubbo made it out, too? What about Tommy? Or Wilbur or Philza?

Bad's saving hope was that he hadn't found the bodies of his missing friends. It was barely a hope, given that almost a thousand bodies were still unaccounted for. But it was the only thing keeping him on his feet.

"I'll find you guys," Bad murmured. He ran his fingers over his wrist again, and this time, the runes glowed a little brighter. "I'll find you."

Kids laughed. People talked, lures dropped into the lake, and throughout the joy and serenity of their new lives, the complete and all-encompassing *nothingness* of the Force stretched across the cavern.

Bad closed his eyes. "That wasn't goodbye."

## Chapter End Notes

And finally, after a full year... Inferno in the Sky comes to a close.

**To anyone who finishes this epilogue and doesn't care to read this (incredibly long) note:** thank you so, so much for being here during this journey. You, my dear audience, have been the backbone of this process all along, and you deserve all the kudos in the world. I thank each and every one of you, and I hope you enjoyed this story! I wish you the best!

Now... I share my plans.

(Author's note, 6/4/22: these plans are no longer applicable, if you couldn't tell. But, since I was really enthusiastic at the time, I thought I'd leave them here for posterity's sake.)

**TL;DR: there will be a second book!**

About midway through the year, I decided that Inferno in the Sky would be the first book of a duology titled Fire in the Order! There is still another story I want to tell within this universe, so to anyone who's a bit disappointed by this epilogue (understandably so, I admit), don't worry! I'm not done, and these characters will be back to finish their story!

**TL;DR: I also have plans to make an entirely original Inferno in the Sky!**

Settling on a duology was not the only decision I made. While writing this story, I realized that I had 300k of potential in my hands. So, after several hours of consideration and many back-and-forths with myself, I decided to make Inferno in the Sky into an original story as well! To everyone who said that they thought this story was basically a novel... those kind words meant more than you'll ever know. From the bottom of my heart, *thank you*.

Writing one's first draft as a mcyt Star Wars fic is not a tactic I expected to work, but somehow, it did! (Do *not* take this as an endorsement - please be smarter than me and write your first draft like a normal person /lh)

I can never thank y'all enough for all the love and support you gave throughout this year. This story has forever impacted me, and I can only hope that this was a story you'll remember. So, until we meet again...

Thank you, my dear readers. <3

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!